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# Journal of Media Practice

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The *Journal of Media Practice* is a peer-reviewed publication that addresses the field of practical work in media industries, art, education and research. It aims to build a profile of established and innovative approaches to media practice in those contexts, and to provide an interdisciplinary forum where practice in one field stimulates thinking in another.

The Journal encourages analysis of practical work located on the shifting boundaries between existing and emerging media forms (film, television, video, multimedia, the Web) in their many and varied contexts. It explores paths that connect education with creative and industry-oriented practice. This forum is intended for a readership of teachers, researchers, critics and media practitioners and artists.

Members of the Editorial Board and the Advisory Panel have a common commitment to the achievement of academic and professional ends through means centred on practical work. The Journal is edited at the Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London.

## Editor

**Lina Khatib**

Department of Media Arts  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
Egham  
Surrey TW20 0EX  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44(0)1784 414 034  
E-mail: [lina.khatib@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:lina.khatib@rhul.ac.uk)

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# Editorial notes for contributors

## I General

### Scope

The *Journal of Media Practice* addresses the field of practical media teaching and research, including creative and professional production, in further and higher education. Considerable expertise now exists in the design and delivery of educational programmes centred on a practical engagement with media forms. However, there have been few effective ways in which teachers, researchers and practitioners with a commitment to developing practical approaches within academic disciplines have been able to circulate ideas and accounts of their work.

In this context, the *Journal* aims to build a profile of established and innovative practical approaches to teaching and research, providing an inter-disciplinary forum where practice in one field will stimulate thinking in another. It will encourage analysis of practical work located on the shifting boundaries between existing and emerging media forms, and explore paths that connect education with creative and industry-oriented practice.

### 'Articles' for peer review

One important role of the *Journal* is to provide the opportunity for peer-review publication of articles submitted in a research context. These are evaluated on the basis of the HEFCE criteria (see Appendix) and published in the 'Articles' section. Articles should be between 3000-5000 words.

Anonymity is accorded to both authors and referees. Referees, normally chosen for their expertise within the subject area, are asked to comment on specialist content, on comprehensibility and on relevant contexts. A summary of the referees' comments will be provided, whether or not the article is accepted for publication.

### 'Contexts and Debates'

The *Journal* is equally committed to providing a forum for debate of current issues and a platform for speculative thinking - such work appears in the 'Contexts and Debates' section. Submissions for this section should be between 1500-3000 words.

### Reviews and Reports

Reviews of relevant books, media projects, conferences and festivals are also welcome, and should be about 500 words long.

### Copy deadlines

The *Journal* is published three times a year. The first number of any Volume is published in February, the second in June and the third in October, with copy deadlines at the end of September (No. 1), end of January (No. 2) and end of May (No. 3).

Contact from potential contributors to discuss possible submissions at an early stage is encouraged.

## II Technical guidelines

Final submissions should observe the following requirements:

### Language and address

The journal uses British English and the editor reserves the right to alter usage to that end. Simple sentence structures and clear expression are encouraged for the benefit of all readers, especially those for whom English is a second language.

### Submissions

Submissions should contain the following elements in this order:

- Abstract (article only)  
The abstract should provide a summary of the key points and not exceed 150 words.
- Keywords (article only)  
Up to six key words should be provided for the benefit of indexing and abstracting services.
- Text  
(See Text Formats and Section III below for technical and style guidelines.)
- Acknowledgements  
Contributors, collaborators, earlier versions, publication contexts, etc.
- References  
Bibliography, Film/Videography, other.
- Artefacts  
Full details of the availability of films, videos and CD-ROMs and other outlets for practice-based teaching and research artefacts referred to in the article.
- Endnotes  
(See Section III below for style guidelines.)

### Technical submission requirements

The final version of the article, incorporating any agreed amendments, should be submitted in the following format:

- 12-point font, double-line spacing
- one-inch margins all round
- continuous pagination
- an indication of the position of any illustrations (see below).

One hard copy is required, together with an electronic version in WORD (either on disk or as a WORD attachment). The disk should be labelled with the name of the author, the title of the article and the software used.

### Photos, illustrations and captions

Photographs and illustrations are very welcome, although generally only black & white reproduction is available.

- Photographs should be supplied in print form OR copied on to PhotoCD (contact editorial office for further details).
- Line drawings and other diagrams should be in a camera-ready state, capable of reduction, OR as Macintosh EPS or TIFF files to a high resolution, accompanied by a hard-copy output.

All photographs and illustrations should be accompanied by a caption which should include the Fig. No., and appear in sequence, with an acknowledgement to the holder of the copyright.

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### Quotations

Within paragraphs, these should be used sparingly and identified by single quotation marks. Paragraph quotations must be indented with an additional one-line space above and below, without quotation marks.

### Citations in body text

Details of work cited should appear in 'References'. Only the author's name, year of publication and page number should appear in brackets in the main body text.

e.g. (Adams 2003: 2)

### References

Bibliographical references from the main body text must adhere to the following basic model:

- Books:  
author's or editor's surname and initials, date of publication, *title* (italics), place of publication: publisher

e.g. Tudor, A (1974), *Image and Influence*, London: Allen & Unwin.

- Articles:  
author's surname and initials, year of publication, 'title' (in single quotation marks), *name of journal* (italics), volume and issue numbers, month/season, start/end page numbers

e.g. Cook, G.R. (1974), 'The Filming of *Badlands*: An Interview with Terry Malick', *Filmmakers Newsletter*, 7: 8 (June), pp. 30-32.

### Notes

Notes appear at the side of appropriate pages, with the numerical sequence running throughout the article. These should be kept to a minimum and identified by a superscript number. See the attached examples. The publisher requests that the Footnote or Endnote facility in WORD should not be used. The superscript numerals should be entered in the main body text and the related notes also placed in the main body text at the end of the article.

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### Author Copy

The principal author(s) of an article will receive one complimentary copies of the journal.

**The Editor welcomes contributions. Any matters concerning the format and presentation of articles not covered by the above notes should be addressed to the Editor.**

## **A Research Context for Articles**

Submissions for the 'Articles' section of the journal should take account of the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] current research criteria. In abbreviated form, these include one or more of the following:

- Original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding (with direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, the public and voluntary sectors);
- Scholarship. The creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases;
- The invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights;
- The use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved devices, products and processes, including design and construction.

The definition of research excludes accounts of routine analysis of processes as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes accounts of the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.

# Books



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## Editorial

**Eileen Elsey**, *Chair, Narrative/NonNarrative/AntiNarrative  
Conference, November 2006*

The articles in this issue are a selection from the Narrative/NonNarrative/AntiNarrative Conference which took place in November 2006 at the Arnolfini Art Gallery in Bristol. The conference brought together academics and people from the media industry to discuss practice, practice-based research and theory across the fields of short film, animation and interaction design, and led into the Encounters International Short Film Festival, which many delegates stayed on to enjoy.

The conference was designed to explore the issues which surround short film. Existing in a myriad of forms – from artists' film, music video and machinima to community video, viral advertising and YouTube, short film's diversity has defied characterisation. In a context where discourses have been dominated by narrative theory it has become the crucible of the new, and requires critical interpretation and interrogation.

Are traditional modes of thinking enough to attend to these issues? Have games and digital production methods further disrupted and added to what we can understand to be film? What is the relationship between media platform, content and audience? What does the increasing ability to work with communities bring to an understanding of what film is – both creatively and critically? The conference sought to examine these questions, drawing on the multiplicity of disciplines involved in the making and the critical evaluation of short film. It functioned as a nexus for a wide variety of practice and theory approaches, and a meeting place between industry and academia.

The conference was designed to cross boundaries – between industry and education, between new and traditional media, between practice and theory – and to explore the role of narrative in media. There was debate – heated at times – around traditional narrative structures and their place in today's multi-platform, interactive media world. There was exploration of the evolution of different ways of approaching structure, communication, and the relationship between audience and author.

The two opening articles from theoreticians in this issue frame the following contributions, which are mainly from practitioners.

Angela Partington's 'The Best Bits: Non-narrative pleasure and creative practice' questions the importance of narrative for audiences, and suggests that moments and spectacle are what really claims the audience's attention and frames their responses. Her approach is based within the Visual Culture discipline, and she argues that meaning is created through a collaborative interaction with the audience, and that innovation is dependent on that relationship.

Tom Abba, in 'As We Might Watch', brings together literary criticism and media theory to pose questions on the nature of interactive film. Although he sees film as dependent on the viewers' engagement with an authored narrative, he argues that interactive work must be allowed to evolve through real audience participation.

Both these authors question the primacy of the narrative form and the authorial voice. Whilst Partington argues that it is the audience's response and participation after the making of the film which creates meaning and leads to innovation, Abba believes that the participation of the audience is central to the making, it becomes the narrative event.

Suzi Hanna's article discusses the working relationship between composers and animators. She considers a variety of practitioners – including Oskar Fischinger, Oliver Postgate, Michel Gondry, and her own work – and examines the systems they have developed to enable collaboration across their specialist areas of music and animated image. The illustrations represent the varied modes of creativity which have evolved under the pressure of collaboration.

Judith Aston's 'Voices from the Blue Nile', on her long-standing collaboration with anthropologist Wendy James, unpicks some of the issues which arise when using media for ethnographic purposes. She outlines the experimentation which took place around different ways of presenting such research material in interactive form. Drawing on the medium's potential to present juxtapositions of image and sounds for the audience to select from, their experiments relate to 'the anthropology of emotion', ways to communicate the impact of war and displacement on the people of the Sudan borderlands.

Shawn Sobers' 'Consequences and Coincidences' takes as a case study his media literacy work with school children on a project which encouraged them to consider storytelling and structure. For the participants, the process is the most important aspect, and where the learning takes place. However, he argues that there is much to be learnt from examining both the process and the outcomes of this project, and considers the ways in which both film-makers and audience participate in the creation of meaning. He places his findings in a wider context of disruptive narrative strategies, community media, and teaching and learning methods.

There are two final short pieces in this issue, from Alia Syed and Michael Chanan. Syed's glancing and impressionistic piece on the making of her installation *A Story Told* is likely to infuriate some readers and intrigue others. It brings her personal process together with the decisions made in the design and making of the installation, and her thoughts on the movement of the audience through that installation and their responses to it. Michael Chanan's interesting unpicking of Jorge Furtado's eight-minute documentary *Island of Flowers* explores the ways in which short film at its best can keep us thinking long after the credits have rolled. In this film, Furtado parodies documentary modes of address and recycles both images and information to forge a documentary style which communicates his argument succinctly and powerfully, and which is ideal for the film's duration. These two pieces echo each other in their global approach to questions of identity and inequality.

The selection of material for the Journal has perforce centred on material which will transpose to the printed page reasonably smoothly. Where it would be useful to view work in connection with the paper, we have included websites or other sources whenever possible. Much of the excitement the conference generated, however, stemmed from presentations on work in progress from experimental practitioners, which proved impossible to adapt to the page. Mark Simon Hewis' experimental film *The Life Size Zoetrope*, commissioned by Channel 4 and the Arts Council, turns a fair-ground ride into a giant zoetrope. The process meshed live action and animation in a particularly innovative way. Martin Kiszko presented work on his film *Shadowed*, demonstrating his use of 'Soundbeam' (which uses ultrasonic beams) to enable performers to conjure up images, sounds and music on film. Other abstracts may be read at [www.cmrg.uwe.ac.uk/archive](http://www.cmrg.uwe.ac.uk/archive).

Plans are now afoot for the next Narrative/NonNarrative/AntiNarrative conference, to be mounted in collaboration with media industry partners. (Go to [www.cmrg.uwe.ac.uk](http://www.cmrg.uwe.ac.uk) for the Call for Papers.) The commonality of interest recognised by both the media industry and academia in this area, and the need for further cross-fertilisation in practical and theoretical approaches to narrative and the short form has generated enthusiasm for the next event. We hope to see the process of debate and knowledge exchange, which began at our first conference, continued and developed further.



Fourth *Journal of Media Practice* Symposium  
Supported by the MeCCSA Practice Section

**University of Leeds 20 June 2008**

### **Media Practice and its field**

The relationship with professional practice, teaching and research

Call for Presentations and Papers

The fourth *JMP* symposium will be convened at the University of Leeds Institute of Communications on Friday 20 June 2008. The theme is our context – how we interact with our field. This is about how we teach media practice, how researchers and educators relate to professional and conventional practice (and vice versa), and how our research by and through practice relates to other research methods and activity in the same field. A particular focus this year will be on postgraduate work, such as on media practice in research awards or on training for teaching media practice.

Proposals for creative presentations, screenworks or extracts, posters, handouts, performances, talks or traditional papers – anything that relates to media practice as an academic subject – are welcome. There will be opportunity for additional screenings or audio presentations as appropriate. As previously, extracts and proceedings will be published and participants invited to submit to both the *JMP* and *Screenworks*. The organisers would like to receive proposals of up to 500 words plus other artefacts or information as relevant, by Monday 14 April 2008.

Enquiries (including about available space and technical resources) and proposals to:

Ian W. Macdonald

Louis Le Prince Centre for Cinema, Photography and Television

Institute of Communication Studies

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

(+44) 113 343 5816

E-mail: [i.w.macdonald@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:i.w.macdonald@leeds.ac.uk)

# The best bits: Non-narrative pleasures and creative practice

Angela Partington *University of the West of England*

## Abstract

*This article is a discussion about the development of media practice both as a creative endeavour and as the collaborative interaction with audiences. It argues that innovations in media practice are dependent on the relationships between practitioners and viewers and that in order to work as 'cultural intermediaries', media practitioners need an understanding of how audiences' relationships with media forms (specifically the ways in which viewers use them to experience shared pleasures) drive innovations in practice. It is also intended as a contribution to the development of Visual Culture as a discipline which is distinct from older critical discourses such as Art History and Film Studies, insofar as its 'objects' of study are the practices of looking/watching, rather than images/visual forms as fetishised objects. Any critical discourse which aspires to understand the emergence/development of contemporary media forms needs to focus on the ways in which audiences use them, rather than on aspects of 'form' such as narrative.*

## Keywords

creativity  
pleasure  
spectacle  
audience-participation

This article is a discussion about the development of media practice both as a creative endeavour and as the collaborative interaction with audiences. It will be argued that innovations in media practice are dependent on the relationships between practitioners and viewers and that in order to work as 'cultural intermediaries', media practitioners need an understanding of how audiences' relationships with media forms (specifically the ways in which viewers use them to experience shared pleasures) drive innovations in practice.

Any practice which aspires to be creative needs to participate in the production of difference and newness which are fundamental elements of Modern life.

Creativity is an aspect of the general processes of cultural change (associated with 'promiscuity' and 'hybridisation' – see below) rather than (or as well as) the activities of those individuals designated as professional practitioners. Creative practice is necessarily collaborative, not only with other professionals in the cultural industries, but also with consumers who are already involved in the production of newness and difference. I would argue that 'creativity' is not in the manipulation of form in itself (although this may be involved), but in enabling 'product differentiation' – conferring identities on cultural forms which allows audiences to use them in their own identity-development. I will be suggesting that practitioners' concerns with problems of 'form' (e.g. narrative) distract them

from developing an understanding of audiences' participations which stimulate innovation.

It is also intended as a contribution to the development of methodologies for the study of visual culture, and the development of Visual Culture as a discipline which is distinct from older critical discourses such as Art History and Film Studies. Unlike those disciplines, Visual Culture's 'objects' of study are the practices of looking/watching, rather than images/visual forms as 'fetished objects' (Bal 2002: 25). Any critical discourse which aspires to understand the emergence/development of contemporary media forms needs to focus on the ways in which audiences use them, rather than on aspects of 'form' such as narrative.

This depends on recognition that the meanings of media forms are a product of the relationships which audiences have with them, rather than 'in' the forms themselves. In order to grasp how audiences develop meaningful relationships with media forms, we need to understand the pleasures of watching as part of the development of viewers' shared identities, which is itself a 'creative' practice.

Discussion of these developments can contribute to and strengthen our understanding of 'culture' as a heterogeneous, promiscuous and conflicted product of collaborative practices, actively participated in by both producers and consumers, rather than something 'produced' by professional 'creatives' and 'consumed' by audiences. It can also contribute to the development of research methodologies which are capable of furthering our understanding of consumers' participation in the 'creative industries'.

### **Manufactured product/cultural form**

In order to understand how audience participation drives innovation, creative practitioners need not only to understand their position in industrial production, but to recognise that, because of the unpredictability of consumer culture (see below), the processes of 'manufacturing' depends on and stimulates creativity. This makes it possible for practitioners not only to compete as 'marketeers' but to embrace this unpredictability and participate in the production of difference and newness which audiences are engaged with.

One of the obstacles to creativity is, I would argue, a notion of authorial production which still prevails, for example, in the continued reluctance to appreciate media forms as 'industrial products' and fully embrace the ways in which complex production processes (including audience research) opens up creative possibilities.

In the 1980s Christopher Lorenz argued that the American industrial designer provides a model for the creative practitioner in general, because s/he occupies a position within the industrial production process which enables him/her to relate to any client and to any given consumer group. This is because (unlike the British creative practitioner) s/he does not have the problem of seeking approval from a 'cultural leadership'.

Fine artists increasingly work as 'industrial designers' insofar as they develop ideas/concepts/images which they communicate to technicians and craftspeople who 'manufacture' the work, which then only becomes 'art' when it is curated/collected/critically recognised. The 'artist' is

responsible for a relatively small, if crucial, 'percentage' of the artwork. Contemporary art is now often made by 'production companies' not dissimilar to those within the pop music, film and television industries. Yet many creative practitioners who aspire to work in 'industry' continue to approach their work as if their 'creativity' is to entirely do with their individual 'craft' skills. The emphasis on formal problems such as narrative is symptomatic of a continued approach to creative practice as a 'craft' rather than a collaboration.

Although Fine Artists have become relatively comfortable with their role in the marketplace (e.g. the Turner Prize, the Frieze Artfair), and with the more entrepreneurial skills required, there remains an attachment to notions of authorial production in other practice-based creative arts curricula, including media. There is still a tendency amongst practitioners, (and often those who teach them), to believe that to distance oneself from the 'commercial' world is itself a prerequisite to developing 'individual' creativity. Even in advertising there is a reluctance amongst creative practitioners to associate themselves with marketing.

Recent developments in the cultural industries have brought long-running debates about professional creative production into renewed focus. The recognition of 'user-generated content' as a valuable resource in industrial research and development, and the acquisition of small 'amateur' websites as a new form of marketing (see Meyer) has reinvigorated old arguments about the 'democratisation' of art through technological change, and about the future roles of professional cultural intermediaries and 'gatekeepers' who have in the past often appeared to be 'obstacles to creativity' (Pareles 2006: 10).

Because 'no one knows' (Caves 2000: 5) what new forms and practices consumers are going to develop, and there is no way of predicting the directions in which consumer culture will go, the cultural industries need creative practitioners or 'cultural intermediaries' with skills of 'reflexivity' (Nixon 2003:18, 23, 25). The development of 'viral marketing' is evidence both of the elusive/unpredictable nature of consumer behaviour (which has created a long-term crisis in the advertising industry), and of the dependence of professional cultural producers on popular/everyday creative practices. Industrial 'research' revolves around the attempt to understand consumers' 'creativity' – it enables production to be consumption-led.

Recent examples of engagement with 'user-generated content' as industrial research/development include Paul Greengrass's 'The Bourne Ultimatum', the video for the re-release of Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', and a new television advertisement for 'Brylcreem' (see Beale). Professionals are turning to video-sharing websites for inspiration, and to find out 'how images are now' (Greengrass quoted in Hoyle 2007: 29). Broadband is being recognised 'as a new way of not just consuming content but creating it too' (Graham 2007: 12).

It can be argued that industrial production has always been consumption-led, that consumption is the 'vanguard of history' (Miller 1995), and that recent changes are 'a technological remix of the processes of folk culture' (ibid) rather than fundamentally new developments. (Although there are significant differences from earlier developments such as cinema,

in that the means of production are more accessible.) Indeed the development of digital technology was itself driven by the failure of 'mass markets' and the need to respond to consumers' demand for more and more choice.

Some of the consequences of this 'technological re-mix' signify the reassertion of a pluralist aesthetic which is incompatible with the 'aesthetic disposition' (see Bourdieu) of the Modern(ist) cultural leadership. 'Multiplying choices promise ever more diversity, evermore possibilities for innovation. . . . (and) an increasingly atomized audience, a popular culture composed of a zillion mini-cults'. (Pareles 2006: 11) At the same time the sharing and collective enjoyment of cultural forms is where their ultimate meaning and value lies. 'The internet liberates you to build content solely around communities of interest' (Graham 2007: 12).

But Modernist aesthetics prioritise the pleasures of form above the 'ordinary'/everyday pleasures of consumption (see Docker), so the cultural leadership are increasingly unable to make sense of, let alone participate in, contemporary consumer culture.

The recent proliferation of 'short' media forms (see Burrell 2007a), for example, stimulated by consumers' appreciation of 'clips' and inspired by homemade video parodies of TV products, is lamented by professional broadcasters and critics who predictably dismiss it as evidence of the viewer's 'short attention span', and part of a general 'dumbing down'. But for those who aspire to understand the meaningfulness of our relationships with cultural forms, rather than merely to value some forms more highly than others, it is recognised as one aspect of the reassertion of a populist and/or 'carnavalesque' aesthetic in which creativity is harnessed to the transformation of values and identities; creativity which 'transcends what (professionals) were used to' (Sorrell quoted in Burrell 2007: 5).

### **The pleasures of narrative 'form' vs. 'popular' tastes**

The Modernist emphasis on form supported practices which devalued popular pleasures through the elimination of imagery (abstraction in fine art), ornament and decoration (functionalism in design), and 'spectacle' (e.g. realist documentary and anti-Hollywood/avant-garde cinema).

Notwithstanding the avant-garde's fascination with 'everyday life' and the aspiration to 'transgress' moral and social boundaries, spectacle and sensation were associated with base/ordinary pleasures and seen as the means by which capitalism oppressed/controlled the masses (see Debord). Forms which appealed to such 'vulgar' tastes were dismissed as either culturally worthless or ideologically suspect (see Hebdige).

At a recent conference I heard a theologian comment on the lack of interest in visual culture (despite the obvious significance of imagery in religion) within his own discipline, which he explained as a symptom of the notion that the visual was 'profane'. What's more surprising is the similar contempt for/suspicion of the visual which is evident even within those disciplines which claim to be interested in visual culture; for example in Film Studies the use of concepts such as 'narrative' which are borrowed from literary theory, as if it is only by relating media products to non-visual forms that serious interest becomes justifiable.

Pleasures which involve a lack of restraint and/or physiological/emotional 'excess' typified those which were distinguished from/contrasted with the 'aesthetic' in Modernism, and are often associated with 'carnavalesque' forms/practices which have survived from pagan/folk cultures. Certain kinds of 'spectacle' such as fairgrounds, wrestling, 'freakshows', peepshows, 'exotic' dancing, and so forth have survived in new forms/media to create a wide range of contemporary popular genres, such as striptease, horror movies, pop idols, themed environments, club culture, and so forth. These popular forms re-assert the carnivalesque and have contributed to the demise/failure of Modernism and the emergence of postmodernist forms/practices (see Docker).

It is important to note, however that 'popular culture' is heterogenous and 'conflicted' (see Collins), and that popular/everyday pleasures are diverse and specific. The 'popular' cannot be understood simply as the mainstream 'other' of a Modernist aesthetic. Popular taste is plural: the development of digital technology and new media was/is precisely in order to be able to address increasingly differentiated taste cultures.

Moreover, popular tastes transcend the Modernist oppositions between 'aesthetic' and 'ordinary' pleasures, and between the pleasures of 'form' and the pleasures of 'content'. To experience the ordinary/everyday pleasures of the 'spectacle', consumers have to acquire/develop skills/competences/tastes to enable the reading of highly specific/developed visual forms/styles. The consumption of pop videos, TV adverts, film musicals, costume dramas, pornography, football-on-TV, SFX, action movies, soap operas, and so forth requires high levels of 'visual literacy' and the success/popularity of these genres depends as much, if not more, on their 'form'/style than on their content. Indeed, because the meanings of popular forms are ultimately to do with the identity of the consumer, imagery and style is more important than any information/narrative/subject-matter they may refer to or represent, because the 'look' of the object offers more opportunity for the exercise of specific tastes. The form is the content. Consumers use all art, media and design products as 'fashion' commodities which 'say' more about their own particular values/identities than anything that producers might intend to convey through, for example, narrative.

## **The pleasures of watching and identity-development**

Just as creative practitioners are reluctant to associate themselves with marketing, cultural critics are similarly suspicious of market/audience research, and tend to assume that it somehow stifles creativity. In a newspaper article, Mark Kermode bemoaned the fact that audience testing was leading to the disappearance of strong narratives in Hollywood films and to the production of films which were consequently, in his view, inferior (see Kermode). As a film critic his job is to make judgements about films which inevitably reflect his own (and his readers') values/tastes but, from the point of view of one who aspires to understand audiences' relationships with films, he is missing an important point. The fact that audience testing suggested that narrative was relatively unimportant to the viewer, (compared to, e.g., actors' performances, and/or the 'entertainment' value

of films) enables us to begin to understand how audiences use films in the development of their own identities.

Recent television polls (e.g. 'TV's Bitchiest Moments', 'Top 100 Film Thrills', 'The Best TV Ads Ever') suggest that audiences relate to media products as a collection of 'moments', and this supports the argument that the meanings of contemporary media forms cannot be fully understood in terms of formal characteristics such as narrative structure. Although narrative may be thought of by some audiences as a necessary part of some form, or as some kind of pre-requisite to an engagement with it, it is nevertheless relatively unimportant in the production of meaning.

Cultural/media forms have no meaning in themselves – it is the relationships which viewers have with them which is meaningful, so it is irrelevant whether one is 'long'/'short', narrative/antinarrative, or otherwise.

For example, the meaningfulness of the viewer's relationship with a 'narrative form' need not have anything to do with its narrative. The meaningfulness of a moment/image is independent of any narrative function it might have, for example sex scenes, car chases, fights, and other kinds of 'spectacle' which have little or no narrative purpose nevertheless offer the opportunity to produce shared pleasures which are meaningful in themselves. (Even scenes which do have narrative purpose may be enjoyed primarily in terms of their 'spectacular' values – for example the pleasures of watching actors/stars being 'themselves' rather than portraying a character, and soap fans tuning in for an episode *because* rather than despite already knowing what's going to happen.) This explains why there are so many versions of so few stories, and why the publicity for new films focuses on its imagery rather than its story (e.g. the media coverage for the release of 'Casino Royale' was dominated by pictures of Daniel Craig emerging from the sea).

Audiences are not static groups which can be easily identified in terms of age, class, gender, and so forth and consumer culture is increasingly fragmented into 'subcultures' and highly differentiated 'taste cultures' whose 'habitat' (see Bourdieu) symbolises their social position. But rather than approaching 'taste' as the expression of an already-formed identity, it needs to be understood as the transformative production of new identities. Identities are performative, and always 'in production'; 'temporary attachments to subject positions constructed through discursive practices' (Hall: 6).

Audiences emerge as a consequence of complex historical, economic, and socio-cultural forces, and the need for cultural industries to find audiences for creative products means that an increasingly large proportion of their resources is spent on market research which attempts to make sense of changing tastes and values. In the context of creative practice, research is an interpretative activity which I would argue is converging with that of the marketer. In his 'Postmodern Marketing' books Stephen Brown argues that marketing needs to recognise itself as a creative practice (rather than a science), and I would argue that creative practice needs to recognise itself as marketing, defined as 'the production of "meaningful distinctions"' (Levitt quoted in Brown 1995). Art, design and media practices are above all else the creation of distinction, the development of 'identities' for cultural products which are meaningful only insofar as they relate to socio-cultural differences between consumer-groups.

One way of understanding audiences is in terms of shared familiarity with images – a common repertoire of ‘moments’ from which to draw in the production of inter-textual meanings. It is obvious that viewers find pleasure and meaning not only in images (e.g. landscapes, bodies, clothes, cars, interiors, etc.) within a ‘narrative’ form, which may or may not have any relevance to the narrative, but also that these pleasures/meanings are to do with their membership of an audience defined in terms an ability to make shared intertextual meanings (see Partington). One of the possible pleasures of looking at the image of Daniel Craig emerging from the sea, for example, derives from the viewers’ familiarity with the similar image of Ursula Andress in ‘Doctor No’, and the sharing of this familiarity with other members of the audience.

Celebration of the ‘best bits’ is one of the ways in which audiences develop their own values and identities. Fans of ‘Pulp Fiction’, for example, enjoy the film as a compilation of images whose meanings/pleasures are entirely dependent on shared competences/tastes which derive from familiarity with other images/moments (John Travolta dancing, Uma Thurman’s hair and make-up, references to ‘Kool and the Gang’, Samuel L Jackson’s performance, the music, etc.).

Viewers create meanings by using their shared familiarity with other images to make cross-media inter-textual references. The recent news photograph of the ‘Marlboro Marine’, for example, quickly became an ‘iconic image’ (see Sinco) because of audiences’ familiarity both with the Marlboro cowboy from the cigarette advertisements and with a whole repertoire of images of war heroes from the movies.

Such inter-textual meanings and pleasures depend on the participation of the audience and their specific competences (see O’Donahoe). The television series ‘Desperate Housewives’ and pop videos for ‘The Darkness’ are ‘parodic’ to me but not to my children, or at least not in the same way. Because intertextuality is a product of viewers’ relationships with images/objects, rather than a feature of images/objects themselves, analysis must address questions about the ways viewers use images to produce meaning (e.g. how do viewers of ‘Glamour porn’ or ‘Big Brother’ use them to produce both sexist/racist and feminist/anti-racist meanings?).

### **Promiscuity/hybridity/innovation**

Rather than studying visual culture as a collection of media-specific forms with their own particular formal characteristics/possibilities, we need to approach it as consumers do – a continual multi-layered flow of images where there are no fundamental distinctions between different media or forms. For example, from the viewer’s point of view, all images are ‘time-based’, that is experienced in the temporal domain. And from the viewer’s point of view, all images are ‘fashion commodities’ – used to express and/or transform current identities/values.

Yet critical discourses tend to focus on specific media/forms (‘Television Studies’, ‘Design Theory’).

All creative media are ‘promiscuous’ (think of the ways in which films have been inspired by comics and vice versa), and some practitioners have used this promiscuity to push boundaries and challenge our expectations



of particular media. Caravaggio's 'paintings' are arguably early photographs because they were made using light projections, Warhol's 'Empire State' is a film which 'pretends' to be a painting, Lichtenstein paintings simulate printed images, photorealist paintings simulate photographs, digital illustrations simulate paintings, and so on. Yet practitioners are often encouraged to develop their creativity through manipulation of a specific medium.

Paul Gilroy has argued that 'cultural purity' and 'absolute difference' do not exist, by stressing the 'promiscuity' of cultures in the production of newness and difference (see Gilroy). Identities are developed not in a relation of absolute distinction from others', but through parodic copying/emulation and flirtation/appropriation which creates hybridisation.

For example, new identities emerge when audiences 'appropriate' cultural products not originally intended for them – a common occurrence in everyday culture as different groups 'parody' others through consumption practices. Such appropriations stimulate innovations in creative practice. The consumption of martial arts movies by Western audiences has enabled the development of new kinds of films which rely on the viewer's familiarity with the particular kinds of fight scenes (e.g. 'Crouching Tiger', 'Hero'); similarly women's consumption of action movies has stimulated an increased aestheticisation of the male body in that genre (e.g. Daniel Craig in 'Casino Royale').

Through the shared pleasures of consuming images, viewers are involved in the everyday/continual development of increasingly multiple/hybrid identities (which generates newness). The meaningfulness of the viewer's encounter with the image depends on his/her previous encounters with other images, through which they have developed competences/cultural capital. These competences can be used to generate any number of inter-textual references, whether anticipated/intended by the producer or not. The sharing of these competences and the collective production of inter-textual references generates the pleasures of watching/viewing as a member of a specific audience. This is not to express an already-formed identity but to develop/transform it.

As audiences become increasingly sophisticated/competent and familiar with more/diverse visual forms, media production has to 'keep up'. An understanding of audiences' production of inter-textual meanings can inform and inspire creative practices, for example, in advertising, which has become a form of 'sponsored entertainment' (e.g. the Cadbury's Dairy Milk drumming gorilla, the Sony Bravia multi-coloured balloons). The growth of 'parodic' television (such as 'The Sopranos'), and of new forms of cinematic 'spectacle' (such as '300'), as well as the proliferation of 'short' media forms, should also be understood as audience-led developments.

It has been argued that creativity is only possible within established conventions/expectations which enable the introduction of some element of innovation/difference within what is recognisable/familiar (see Negus). Creativity is 'highly context dependent' (Nixon 2003: 10), and it can be argued that, far from being a 'restriction', commercial interests help to drive innovation in creative practices. Industry needs innovation because consumer culture is unpredictable.

Through the experience of shared non-narrative pleasures, contemporary audiences develop skills and tastes which drive innovations in post-modern culture.

Creative practice is necessarily collaborative, not just with other professionals in the cultural industries, but with consumers who are already involved in the production of newness. The creative media practitioner can then be understood as a 'cultural intermediary'. 'Creativity' is not in the manipulation of form in itself, but in enabling 'product differentiation' – creating distinctions between cultural forms which resonate with the ways in which audiences use them.

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### **Contributor details**

Angela Partington teaches Visual Culture at the Faculty of Creative Arts, UWE. She has published a number of articles on consumption and identity and is currently engaged in research which addresses the relationships/convergences between academic and industrial research and theories of creativity. Contact: Angela Partington, Dr., Head of Visual Culture, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of the West of England, Kennel Lodge Road, Bristol, BS3 2JT, UK.  
E-mail: Angela.Partington@uwe.ac.uk

# As we might watch: What might arise from reconsidering the concept of interactive film?

**Tom Abba** *University of the West of England*

## Abstract

*To date, an interactive film form has been conceived of in terms of branching; multi-linear narratives predominantly drawing on the mechanics of the computer games industry. The interactive engagements that have been produced within this framework have failed to revolutionise either the gaming or the film industry, leading the director Peter Jackson to remark on the announcement of his deal with Microsoft to develop the form, that his team still have to 'work out how to do it' (Waters 2006). Might this apparent stalling in the production process actually arise from an incomplete consideration of the potential of interactive film? Film and interactive experiences have much to offer each other beyond simply altering the narrative structure of a linear story. In this light, a rethinking of the modes of address afforded by an interactive environment, both in new media and more traditional narrative form, highlights a new territory that might be created by merging their agendas, rather than attempting to reconcile their forms.*

## Keywords

interactive  
narrative  
film  
ergodic  
games

In his introduction to *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, the collection's editor Michael Chabon proposes that the staple form of modern short fiction 'the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story' (2003: 6), with which the medium has been enamoured since the middle of the last century, may in fact be stifling experimental narrative development. Advocating a return to the values of pulp fiction; of plot and of genre; Chabon suggests that we must look to the past in order to revitalise the future of short written fiction. Assessing that introduction in light of interactive artefacts illustrates the degree to which Chabon's position might be pertinent to the future convergence of interactive media and film:

Imagine that, sometime about 1950, it had been decided, collectively, informally, a little at a time, but with finality, to proscribe every kind of novel from the canon of the future but the nurse romance. Not merely from the critical canon, but from the store racks and library shelves as well. Nobody could be paid, published, lionised or cherished among the gods of literature for writing any kind of fiction other than nurse romances.

Chabon's alternative present illuminates the nature of contemporary interactive design, particularly with regard to a nascent interactive film

1 It is the belief of the author that it is incumbent on new media to develop a language by which content produced for it genuinely operates within the frame of the medium, rather than solely relying on a production and critical framework belonging to an earlier mode of address. 'Neoteric', defined here as 'being of recent origin; modern', is suggestive of such a status.

2 The Italian tradition of illusionistic painting applied a Renaissance-led confidence in handling perspective upon the painted surface to projects for ceilings in order to overcome the problems of applying linear perspective to the concave surfaces of domes in order to dissolve the architecture and create illusions of interior space.

form. The field has been encouraged and pushed in equal parts toward a constant recycling of motifs and themes, offering little in the way of genuinely neoteric<sup>1</sup> development. The promise of an early convergence of film and new media, identified by David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin as 'interactive films' was a form by means of which 'the new medium remediates by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized' (2000: 47). This strategy of remediation, of absorbing the qualities of an existing form into the new, has produced a genre of computer games (for example, *Myst*, *Doom* and the *Resident Evil* series) within which the impact of classical cinematic form has been presented successfully in new media, but with no corresponding development in the language of film and audience.

Bolter and Grusin's thesis identifies the presence of remediative strategies in illusionistic<sup>2</sup> painting and photography, proposing that 'they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation' (2000: 47). That desire to break free of the mediative action, to place the viewer in the same space as the subject viewed, informs their exploration of the nature of remediation in new media. By positioning the viewer thusly, immediacy of reception is achieved, and the frame of the medium itself is at least partially removed. Simultaneously, the nature of new media as hypermediated – multiple screen views offering a cacophony of content, produces a tension between the viewer's perception of immediacy and their experience of distinct media elements. Critically though, this exposes a flaw in the logic of remediative strategies in new media. By desiring, as they express it 'to borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analog predecessors such as film, television and photography' (2000: 9) remediated new media content exposes itself to the risk of simply repeating the initial difficulties of expression encountered by each predecessor. Certainly, new media cannot operate in cultural isolation from other media forms, but by embracing this strategy, its potential is curtailed, and in doing so, any opportunity to genuinely develop an interactive film form is strangled at birth.

Interactive narratives have long offered the promise of emergent experiences, a narrative flow determined by the reader of the text, rather than its author. Geoff Ryman's *253*, Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* and Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* all represent structuralist experiments with interactive narrative form. Each proposes a form of story governed by formal rules and devices. A degree of interactive playfulness is present in each, but as a byproduct of the form, rather than one embedded into its purpose, offering each reader an experience that is usefully considered in line with behavioural definitions of play, rather than a reading dependent on literary analysis. Ryman's work is dependent on repeated reading, the pleasure of experiencing each path through the narrative is the result of each course apparently representing a unique route through the conceit of the structure. Borges' text, representing the primary model for much practice in hyper-textual narrative to date, offers a reading of the universe as possessing innumerable possible futures, each experienced as the path

taken by a life lived through individual moments of decision and consequence. *Afternoon*, while retaining the formal qualities of early hypertext, modelled on Borges' narrative, is nevertheless designed to have a 'superior reading' or 'sequence', one that results in the conclusion of the narrative being reached. However, this is a sequence that serves to, as Jill Walker (Walker 1999) points out,

ease the new reader into reading *Afternoon*. Reading this sequence gave me enough background information to start enjoying the leaps between story lines, and to understand connections where I'd earlier only been confused.

- 3 Simply put, that since players enter a game scenario with limited understanding of the narrative environment and character, their actions are subject to an in-game 'amnesia' as regards the world within which the game takes place.

Further exploration of *Afternoon* yields its richness; escaping the confines of linear text is the ur-purpose of the structure Joyce employs, rather than its result. In both Ryman and Joyce's work though, there is a deliberate effort on the part of the author to instil a structure to the reader's experience of their texts. Formal devices are employed; Ryman uses a diagram of a tube train to 'restrain' his reader, Joyce the confines of linked nodes in hypertext; and by means of this subtle 'control', the reader is denied an experience of true narrative agency within an interactive environment. Both authors resist the lure of postmodern freedom; their reader is not permitted the free-form exploration offered within a wider reading of the internet, rather they are guided into patterns designed to maximise their pleasure inside the interactive text. In terms of interactivity, they are constrained within a text authored from afar. The equivalent, in cinematic terms, of selecting an alternate camera angle through which to watch unfolding action on the screen, or following a minor, rather than major character's actions. Rather than desiring the freedom of exploration, the interactive reader is comforted by the knowledge that the multiplicity of their destinations will eventually converge.

Ernest Adams' 1995 presentation to the Computer Games Developer's Conference addresses the territory of Bolter & Grusin's '*interactive movie*'. Adams' proposition, that, 'I think, in truth, interactivity and storytelling are in an inverse relationship to one another. I don't actually want to say that they're mutually exclusive, but I do think that the more you have of one, the less you're going to have of the other, and vice versa', highlights the tension between an author (or director)'s desire to tell a story, and their audience's expectation of some facility to alter its outcome. Ten years later, Adams developed this theme, pointing out that interactive film, modelled on a form derived from computer games, would produce:

this problem of logical consistency, or at least internal consistency. We've got this problem of narrative flow, of getting the player to the dramatic climax, all prepared for the dramatic climax. And we've got this problem of amnesia.<sup>3</sup>

The detail implied in Adams' complications come clearly to the fore if the nature of film, computer games and a merged form of the two are compared in summary:

	Classical Film	Computer Games	'Interactive' Film (drawing on Bolter and Grusin's suggestion)
Logical Consistency	Author is in control – characters behave within guidelines	Player engagement is constrained by the plot and circumstances of action	Problematic – the player has free will, and will probably act on it
Dramatic Climax	The pace and story threads determine the point of narrative climax	Driven by level, score, linear direction of play	Inherently difficult – the reader will choose when to finish the story
Character Amnesia	Third-person viewing perspective affords the writer control over information	Artificial – Second- person player perspective only allows information to be released as and when required	Hugely problematic – First-person viewer perspective results in character/reader not understanding scenario

4 Sontag notes that as he completed *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James confided in his notebook ‘his worry that his readers would think that the novel was not really finished, that he had “not seen the heroine to the end of her situation”’.

A hybrid interactive film form, as offered by a remediative strategy, appears unduly problematic in this light. The competing desires of author and audience are difficult to resolve while considering an interactive film as a discrete object.

Furthermore, a viewer of classical film form expects to be able to reach the final reel and have the story satisfactorily concluded. A participant in emergent interactive fiction is apparently afforded no such closure. On what basis then, do they decide that the story is complete?

Susan Sontag (2007) obliquely addresses this issue in her essay *Pay Attention to the World*, in that she proposes ‘a writer of fiction . . . creates – through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable’, and later in the same essay, ‘characters in a novel act within a time that is already complete, where everything worth saving has been preserved’ (Sontag: 2007). The accusation Sontag levels against interactive narrative, that its emergence is symptomatic of ‘the ideology that has come to dominate departments of literature in many major universities . . . feeding at the same trough of standardised entertainments and fantasies of eros and violence manufactured in the United States, Japan, wherever’, and furthermore, that ‘we do not expect to have to write other peoples novels for them’, in this light, appears to possess some merit. Interactive narrative that possesses no defined ‘right answer’, a superior reading, might indeed present the reader with an ‘endless expansion of words’.

However, Sontag’s resistance to the pleasures of interactive authorship denies her the opportunity to address the traces of story she suggests the likes of Henry James have resisted including within *The Portrait of a Lady*. Later in the same essay, Sontag expresses a desire for Isabel Archer to leave her husband for Caspar Goodwood.<sup>4</sup> Considering Espen Aarseth’s notion

that interactive texts can be defined more widely as *ergodic* (developed in *Cybertext* [Aarseth 1997]), signifying an act of reading that requires non-trivial effort to negotiate, it is arguable that Sontag wishes, ergodically, for a more unified ending to Henry James' novel, and while she is content to grant James his rights as author of a world with borders, her desire reveals a tension between an author's right to closure and their reader's fragmentary visualisation of those margins of story. Later she rightly points out that 'A novel is not a set of proposals, or a list, or a collection of agendas, or an (open-ended, revisable) itinerary. It is the journey itself – made, experienced and completed', but her position excludes the possibility that if the narrative, and arguably story,<sup>5</sup> is a journey, then the negotiation of that travel is made between both parties; the author and the reader.<sup>6</sup> Only on completion is the reader privileged to recognise the route. The extension of Bob Hughes' suggestion that experiencing interactive narrative presents 'the duration of the present moment' (Hughes 1997) is a shifting of the usual perspective of journey from one that lies in front of us (the duration of a TV show or film) to one that becomes apparent, as Sontag suggests for the novel, only after we have completed the path.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, written in such a manner as to deny the reader an objective, closed, perspective on events, is narrated by a first-person observer who refuses to use the personal pronoun to situate himself. As Bruce Morissette (1981: 9) suggests, 'a first-person narrator who, however, never says "I" and whom one never sees or hears, draws us into an identification with him, installs us in the "hole" that he occupies in the center of the text'. This situating of the reader as observer, as a flâneur, works to free the reader from the closure of an imposed narrative exposition. Their need to explore and divulge meaning addresses the tension between Sontag the reader and James' writing. An alternate reading of *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which Isabel Archer's refusal to forsake her scoundrel of a husband is actually a prelude to self-discovery is no less valid than James' decision to leave the tale told on the note he does. If Archer is capable of existence inside the mind of the reader, then responsibility for her fate is a shared pact between author and audience. George Steiner's (2001: 141) metaphor of an inter-textual narrative echo, by which means 'the burning of Virgil's Troy comes after that of Dresden in fresh immediacy' illustrates the reproductive role of context in regard to the reader and their participation. Sontag's refusal to consider sharing the task of authorship speaks not only to a distrust of interactive media, but also to the responsibility of the reader in the creation of a world.

Returning to the metaphor of the journey might serve us well here. A journey taken is realised as such at the point where a destination is reached. Events that occur along the way; stops, lane-changes, meals, meetings and so forth, are experienced as part of an emergent narrative dictated by the act of leaving one place and arriving at another. Iain Sinclair's walks across the landscape of London are only finished in terms of an act of recalling the experience. As Sinclair (in Meacher: 2005) describes it:

The process of movement, moving a body through space, is writing; and when I come to write, I'm just re-remembering, re-experiencing, shaping,

- 5 The Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* (a chronological series of events represented in a fiction) and *sjuzhet* (the manner of their presentation in the narrative) offers some measure of clarity regarding the function of narrative and story. It is included here though, merely to suggest that the shared space between author and reader is worthy of further examination.
- 6 David Bordwell (Bordwell 1985: 53) however, refuses narrative such status, abjuring the status of story as a negotiated space in favour of a model prescribing narration instead as 'the process whereby the film's *syuzhet* [plot] and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the *fabula* [story]'.



7 It should be noted that the *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia* is real. The edition possessed by Borges' colleague Bioy Casares is the fiction.

revising, editing. I'm not going to give an account of the entire experience; I essentially want to register the high moments and the connections of that experience, which I will scribble down immediately at the end of the day because otherwise I'd forget things

As such, the journey undertaken by an interactive participant becomes a series of Sinclair's 'high moments'. If an interactive film can induce the pleasure of such disorder in concert with a sensation of underlying structure, then the participant's version of events, Sontag's 'made, experienced and completed journey', becomes the superior reading she desires.

Within a merging of the agendas of film and interactivity, then, what might be the methodology for offering such a route?

Jorge Luis Borges' *Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* centres on the discovery, within a fictional encyclopaedia, of entries detailing the customs and practices of an obscure middle-eastern state called Uqbar. Borges crafts the story in the first-person, requiring the reader to believe in the existence of not only Uqbar, but in the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia*<sup>7</sup> that, in a unique edition, contains the information signalling entry into the narrative, and in turn, in the '*First Encyclopedia of Tlön*', whose assembly is discussed during Borges' tale. Much has been written on Borges' tactic of inventing a text whose existence drives his narrative forward, the author himself commenting (2000: 5) that:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary . . . More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books.

Borges' tactic, employed, among others, by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*, Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick in *The Blair Witch Project* and Mark Danielewski in *House of Leaves*, asks the reader to participate in the construction and maintenance of an illusion. In addition to simply reading a narrative, they are complicit, in their assumption that each imagined text referred to exists outside of the narrative, in calling those writings into existence. This subtle displacement of the reading experience (in that no action is required on the part of the reader; the displacement occurs naturally) is used to a lesser extent within all fiction; the reader conjures into existence characters, settings and motivations described by the author; however Borges, Eco, Myrick, Sanchez and Danielewski conjure something more than simply a reader's imagination. Initially, the fictional realms of Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius only exist within the volumes described by Borges' text. However, evidence subsequently surfaces that this may not be the case. Borges raises questions about the nature of the creative act: might imagination, to some extent, manifest reality? The interactive process, as has been suggested earlier in this article, represents an opportunity to co-author an emergent text. If the displacement of reader into participant within Borges' text is reminiscent of an ergodic reading experience, it might

be through similar instances of narrative – and reading – disruption, that interactive authorship manifests itself.

Narrative displacement, though, is requisite on the reader encountering the text. Within traditional film, this act is achieved by purchase of a ticket to a performance; a moment of active engagement with the ‘journey ahead’. Interactive narrative though, as proposed above, manifests as the ‘journey taken’ by the reader. The first act of interactive authorship is to determine the reader’s initial encounter with the interactive territory itself. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) typically feature a ‘rabbit hole’, entry into which indicates a willingness on the player’s part to engage with the text presented. These points of entry – websites that request users sign up and create login details or e-mails inviting participation in a game-grounded activity – manufacture the first stage of a consistent alternate reality. An interactive film within the bounds of this article, however, is designed to be viewed by an individual rather than a team of geographically dispersed players. The terms upon which that reader encounters it necessarily differs from an ARG’s rabbit hole. Dan Hill, Director of Web & Broadcast at Tyler Brûlé’s *Monocle* made mention of *Lost*’s emergence as a meta-level new media artefact in 2006. The television show, already discussed and dissected across a wide range of forums and blogs, became defined by a use of new media suggested by Steven Johnson in *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, that, as Hill (2005: 28) puts it,

The amount of content produced about your content should be of far greater weight than the originating content itself. This in turn creates a new kind of content, forged from a social process of collaboration with users, viewers, listeners.

As with *House of Leaves*, *Lost*’s ability to generate independent content reliant on the textual information present within the ongoing series, establishes it as a centre for ‘ripples’ occurring across the landscape of new media. As demonstrated by these two examples,<sup>8</sup> all that is needed to begin the generation of what Johnson labelled ‘para-sites’ is a sufficiently engaging, interwoven source text. An interactive film, then, ought to be able to access this function of narrative, extending the existence of the interactive object beyond its formal, authored boundaries.

In light of Marshall McLuhan’s (2005: 497) observation that ‘Official culture still strives to force the new media to do the work of the old media. But the horseless carriage did not do the work of the horse; it abolished the horse and did what the horse could never do’, it is tempting to shrug off the mistakes of existing digital narratives, and expect that the new ‘animal’ will emerge as a result of experimentation and logical development within new media. Yet, thus far, the degree to which directors have been willing, or able, to engage with that experimentation has been limited. The principles of ARGs, wherein an extended narrative is presented across multiple websites and short, interstitial film clips, affords a model for considering a more significant future. Film, as film, is unlikely to be superseded by the emergence of interactive media. The audience’s engagement with an authored narrative remains a key aspect of the

8 Johnson cites HBO’s *Six Feet Under* as another meta-conversational text. I would add the BBC’s *Doctor Who*, Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* and *American Gods*, David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, and Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Each of these texts boasts a meta-existence out into new media, largely responsible for their ongoing success.

viewing experience. A properly interactive, neoteric merging of film and new media might differ from both traditional and interactive narrative form in that without the participation of an active audience, the story-object has no tangible existence.

Within such an environment the act of interaction itself gives rise to narrative.

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## Contributor details

Dr. Tom Abba is a specialist in narrative theory and practice. He completed his PhD in interactive narrative at UWE in 2007, and teaches into the undergraduate Media Practice programme, MA Media and a wider range of courses at postgraduate level. He maintains an ongoing research interest in the grammar of new media and the language of psychogeography and place, and is active in several Knowledge Transfer projects, working to instigate interactive projects with media organisations across the United Kingdom. Recent Publications: 'Sifting the Signal from the Noise'. (Essay written in response to Watershed's round table discussion with Andrew Keen). Available at: [http://www.dshed.net/studio/events/cult\\_amateur/cult\\_amateur.html](http://www.dshed.net/studio/events/cult_amateur/cult_amateur.html). Contact: Dr. Tom Abba, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of the West of England, Kennel Lodge Road, Bristol, BS3 2JT, UK.  
E-mail: [thomas2.abba@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:thomas2.abba@uwe.ac.uk)

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# Composers and animators – the creation of interpretative and collaborative vocabularies

**Suzie Hanna** *Norwich School of Art and Design*

## Abstract

*This article considers the role of the composer within the creation of animated films, and identifies some historical and contemporary models of interpretation and collaboration between animation director and sonic artist. It is argued that the development of tools and graphic systems for communicating specifics from one field to the other evidences a shared creative vocabulary from which may evolve specialist hybrid vocabularies, and at times may lead to innovative collaborative practice.*

## Keywords

animator  
composer  
interpretation  
collaboration  
shared vocabulary

## The beginnings of synchronised sound and animation in commercial production: Mickey mousing, music and speech

Very early attempts to match sound and image and movement in the production of animated shorts resulted in the invention of the click track, lip-synch and rotoscoping.

In 1928 when Disney's *Steamboat Willie*<sup>1</sup> successfully used the first sound-on-film process to bring an embedded soundtrack to cinema audiences, the musicians – recorded whilst performing to projected animated sequences – synchronised sonic motifs to depictions of Mickey Mouse 'playing' cartoon animals as if they were musical instruments. How could this post-visual musical process be made more accurately achieved?

Carl Stalling, previously an accompanist for silent films, created original soundtracks for Disney films, and as early as 1929 he invented the very first click track technology the *tick system*,<sup>2</sup> which allowed musicians to play in synch with the film. Stalling's personal expertise in timing and dramatising visual events through music had been practised and perfected as an organist in a Kansas theatre. 'In the silent film days a musical score was written to accompany the film when it went into distribution. Sometimes the score failed to arrive and this is how (he) came to be the finest and most competent musician in animation'.<sup>3</sup> He went on to compose music for many popular animated comic series including Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes*. The speed with which the latter films were produced, and the emphasis on humour, led to a pastiche style comprised largely of musical puns, although the soundtrack was still visually driven. But as Maureen Furniss notes:

As early as the 1930s, Hollywood studios were well aware that music used in animated shorts and features could be a source of great profit. Indeed,

- 1 Disney's film *Steamboat Willie* starring Mickey Mouse, premiered in 1928, was the first synchronised sound cartoon.
- 2 Hambleton T: Speaking at *Fantoché Festival 2007* 'Like a metronome, each earphone-wearing musician in the orchestra heard a constant beat that allowed them to synchronize the music more precisely to the action. The system was first used for *The Skeleton Dance* in 1929'.
- 3 Jones C, *Chuck Amuck*, Farrar Straus Giroux NY 1989, p. 189.

- 4 Furniss M, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, Sidney Australia: John Libbey, 1998, p. 94.
- 5 Jones C, *Chuck Amuck*, Farrar Straus Giroux NY, 1989, pp. 104–105.

animation was used as a tool for marketing two types of music – the popular songs of musical performers whose work was owned by the parent studio and original scores created specifically for the animated work.<sup>4</sup>

This introduced the possibility of animated film creation being driven by pre-recorded musical content and the tables were turned, music and sound rapidly becoming more dominant in the consideration and construction of animated films.

Max and Dave Fleischer had registered the patent for a rotoscope technique in 1917, and they attempted to create accurate lip-synch as early as 1926 for their animated short *My Old Kentucky Home*. Cab Calloway was immortalised by Max Fleischer in a *Talkartoon* in 1932, singing *Minnie the Moocher*. The movements of the singer were rotoscoped to create a fantastic singing walrus. In this case, although the song forms part of a narrative featuring the popular cartoon character Betty Boop, the film also worked as a vehicle for the music and for the performer, in effect a form of precursor to the modern music video. Later, animated musicals, for instance Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967) would be dominated by the visual interpretation of singers' performances as character cameos, the mouths of the characters imitating the performers' lip movements. Whether led by visual or audio content, a symbiotic relationship between animator and composer, as well as animator and performer, was established as soon as the technology allowed it.

### Graphic systems: transfer of visual and musical ideas

Graphic systems evolved to contain and communicate sonic and visual aspects of animation production, some animators invented hybrid forms.

Graphic systems have evolved over the last century for communicating time-based information to all creatives involved in the animation and sound processes on any production. From the storyboard and the dope sheet to the composer's annotated manuscript and orchestral score, references to sound are commonly contained within the visual graphics and vice versa. For instance a dope sheet can contain the phonetic breakdown of vocal content for lip-synch, drawings of the characters and written descriptions of action, as well as all the numbered frames for every shot which must function as accurate instructions to the camera operator. Many of these devices are now highly standardised due to the rigours of commercial international production. However, others are designed to fit a particular production, especially if created by a small team of artists who develop their own communication systems.

There is some evidence to suggest that animators can perceive their own art as having musical parallels. Animators and sound designers communicate in all sorts of inventive graphic ways outside of the traditional marks found on musical manuscripts or dope sheets. Animator Chuck Jones wrote the following homage to Friz Freleng, identifying the empathy that an animator may have with the arena of sound, and the ability to plan for sound as yet unrecorded.

Friz timed his pictures on musical bar sheets in the most beautiful tiny lettering you ever saw. These were then transferred onto exposure sheets.<sup>5</sup>

Freleng was appropriating the standard graphic form for timing music, the composer's manuscript paper, to create 'bars' of timed action.

*The Clangers* (1969–1974) was an animated series for children created by Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin. The stories were dominated by sonic ideas:

In space, anything could exist and happen, and indeed did on the Clangers' blue planet. A good example is music. Music first appears when the Iron Chicken lays an egg. Inside there are musical notes. Small and Tiny Clanger plant them, water them with the cloud and they grow and flower into music trees. . . . And although Clangers can play lovely music, their main use for all the notes is propulsion and levitation.<sup>6</sup>

Postgate communicated with Vernon Elliott, the composer, by drawing graphs.

There were wiggly ones, squiggly ones, some looked like mad animals. And these were his sound designs. Oliver had "seen" exactly what he wanted to hear as music and designed it in graph form, with time along the X axis, sound along the Y. It was from these notes that all the music had been composed. This is almost an avant-garde way of composing, with no notes or staves or time signatures, just squiggles. Like a flow of music consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Freleng was creating documents that could be viewed as successfully describing visual ideas in musical terms whereas Postgate may be better viewed as describing musical ideas in visual terms. [Freleng adapted the musical bar sheet as if he were a musician writing in a standard time signature, but instead he was creating bars of timed character action.] By thinking in 'beats' he could plan the dramatic sequences within a pattern, in a similar way to composers adding melodies to an underlying rhythm. Postgate's audio-graphs have similar properties, although he uses lined exercise paper, he still creates equivalents of time signatures. In the Clanger's audio-graph the initial zigzag pattern reflects an even repetition of the marching of the 'hoots' but within that there is a suggested rhythm which repeats every two seconds like a musical bar length. In the third line down, the question and answer session shows a bold ascending solid mark followed by softer broken marks, these read as if they are musical notes in the new 'time signature' which has changed to a meter of three seconds (Figure 1).

## The development of 'visual music': animated dynamics of musicality

The interpretation of music for creating aesthetic structures inspired early experimental animators to make responsive abstract films.

Paul Wells locates the tendency of orthodox animation to contain *the dynamics of dialogue*, (a term he discusses in terms of *symphonic* and *cacophonous*) and he explores the move towards *the dynamics of musicality* found in more experimental animation. 'It may be said that if orthodox animation is about "prose" then experimental animation is more "poetic" and suggestive in its intention'.<sup>8</sup>

6 Benton-Hughes J, *Music of the Spheres on Oliver Postgate Off the Telly* Nov 2001. <http://www.offthetelly.co.uk/childrens/clangersmusic.htm>

7 *ibid.*

8 Wells P, *Understanding Animation*, London UK: Routledge, 1998.



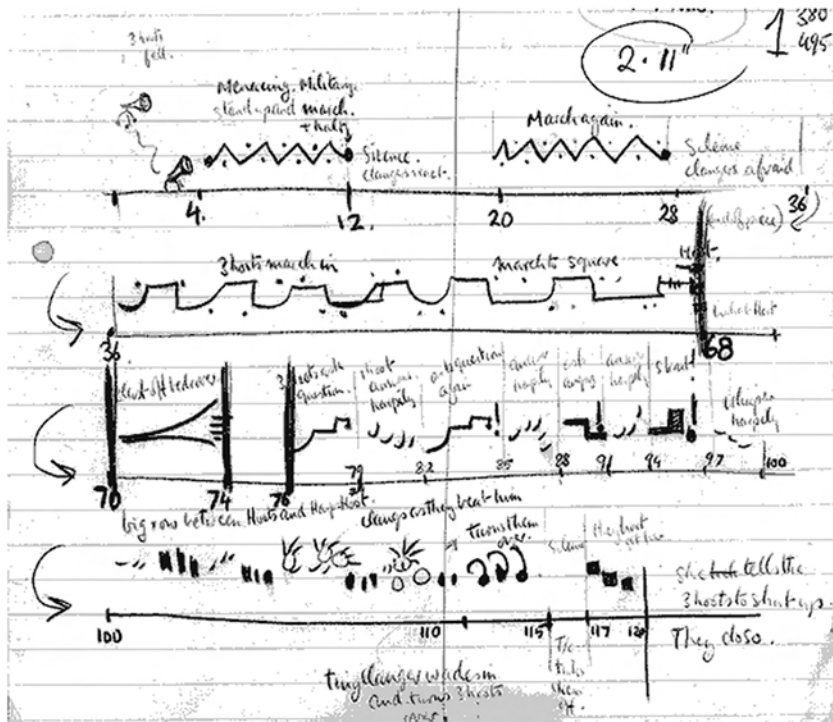


Figure 1: *Clangers* Audio-Graphic (Oliver Postgate). This drawing was created to convey the animator's musical ideas to the composer. Although it may appear to be idiosyncratic, the timings are clear and it is not difficult to understand the relationship between the 'rhythm' of the marks and the description of action and musical intention.

Even in the first half of the twentieth century American studios were refining their use of music and sound to enhance the fantastic visual worlds they had created; there were animators who as artists in their own right were already pursuing ideas about using animation to enhance the fantastic worlds of sound. One of the most innovative of these was Oskar Fischinger.

(Oskar Fischinger) loved music and wanted to imitate it, trying to steal its secrets of harmony, melody and counterpoint and transfer them to the field of images.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 30s Fischinger analysed his musical sources from phonograph records, scratching on them and calculating the time between the sounds in relation to the diameter of the grooves at any given point. This was pioneering practice, a visual artist could create his own system for decoding audio information accurately (that was not already converted to frames in film format).

John Cage, the renowned composer, musical innovator and collaborator described the influence that Fischinger had on him when he was assisting briefly on the production of *An Optical Poem* in 1937:

He happened to say one day, "Everything in the world has its own spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration." I began hitting, rubbing everything, listening, and then writing percussion music, and playing it with friends. These compositions were made up of short motives expressed either as sound or as silence of the same length, motives that were arranged on the perimeter of a circle on which one could proceed forward or backward.<sup>10</sup>

This description may depict a significant influence on John Cage, but Oskar Fischinger interpreted music to create visual responses, he did not 'collaborate' with composers. In 1930 *Studie Nr. 6* failed to be distributed as he could not pay for royalty rights demanded by the composer Jacinto Guerrero. He said, "The creative artist of the highest level works at his best alone, moving far ahead of his time".<sup>11</sup> This indicates that he saw music as an inspirational tool for his animation rather than viewing the composer as an equal creator of the work, even though he transcribed the structure of the music to create a mathematical and emotional base for the films. William Moritz claims that Fischinger's film *Studie Nr. 7* inspired several animators including Norman McLaren and Len Lye 'to pursue a career in abstract musical animation. . . .'<sup>12</sup>

Norman McLaren, when creating 'visual music' was sometimes credited with collaborating with the providers of his musical stimulus. For the short film *Begone Dull Care* he worked closely with the jazz composer and pianist Oscar Peterson. '[Oscar Peterson and Norman McLaren] worked together for four days developing the music. At times Peterson would play variations enabling McLaren to visualize colors and movements, and other times McLaren would describe specific music he wanted for a special effect'.<sup>13</sup> But conversely, McLaren liked to take control of his entire creative process, drawing his own optical soundtrack as well as the visuals onto the film itself in *Synchromy* (1971).

Fischinger, McLaren and Lye have all had a profound influence on several generations of animators, opening up ideas about a synaesthetic and improvisational approach to visualising music. However the medium remains occulocentric, the visual artist is most likely to be credited as the sole director even though the original composition and quality of musical performance may be equal factors in the success of the film.

## Michel Gondry's music videos: optical poetry revisited

Contemporary animators reach new audiences through the music video: this format promotes inventive approaches to visual interpretation of the music.

The dominance and commercial power of music has opened up fantastic opportunities for animators in the form of the music video. Michel Chion comments that:

The music video has invented and borrowed an entire arsenal of devices; it's a joyous rhetoric of images. And this is the paradox of the television-of-optional-images; it liberates the eye. Never is television as visual as during some moments in music videos, even when the image is conspicuously attaching itself to some music that was sufficient unto itself.<sup>14</sup>

10 Cage J, An Autobiographical Statement, *Southwest Review*, 1991.

11 Moritz W., *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger*, UK: John Libbey, 2004, p. 174.

12 *ibid* p. 30.

13 Richard V.T., *Norman McLaren The Manipulator of Movement*, Toronto London: University of Delaware Press AUP, 1982.

14 Chion M., *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*, NY USA: Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 166.

- 15 Wells P., (quoting Tom Simmons) *The Fundamentals of Animation*, SA: AVA Academia, 2006, p. 57.
- 16 Hanna S, *Paganini's Dream: Independent Mixed-media Animation, A Case Study*, MPhil, 2000.

The film director Michel Gondry, much of whose work may be described as animation, has worked in collaboration with Bjork on six music videos. When creating *Paint Piano* he tied a wire to one of Bjork's fingers which was connected to a mechanism that opened an electronic valve. This in turn emptied ink onto a *Spinart* turntable, so the physical action of her fingers on a keyboard created a moving artwork to the melody filmed in live time. 'Outstanding visual interpretations of sound structures'<sup>15</sup> such as those of Michel Gondry, could be considered to be contemporary examples of 'optical poetry' in the tradition of Oskar Fischinger or Norman McLaren. Like them he is interpreting existent music, but unlike them he involves the composer/performer in his filmed imagery, and in *Paint Piano*, even in the animation process itself. He works closely with the musicians and creates visual parallels to elements of the musical form. He sometimes edits the visual clips together mathematically to exactly reflect the song's structure, each musical motif having its own film sequence that repeats every time it is used in the track.

### **Collaborative practice in contemporary independent production: creative communication strategies used by composers and animators**

Examples of modern collaborative practice are given, which although influenced by the creators of 'Visual Music', aspire to less occulocentric outcomes.

A composer may use traditional music scoring for use in collaborative experimental animation, they may create soundscapes and lists of timed sound events, and they can also improvise directly with the animator. The following transcript from a conversation with Bennett Hogg, the composer with whom I collaborated on *Paganini's Dream* (1998) evidences the process of influence across the disciplines.

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| SH: | We sat for days and days in that studio. Quite a lot of things I'd done on the storyboard I'd perceived as action timing, but then to make the piece musical we changed the timing, so where I had put say two seconds for something you'd extend it to ten seconds |
| BH: | It is one of the main differences between visual and audio media, any audio information is dependent on time to be what it is.  |
| SH: | I started with the images as a ghost framework but the music became the structure <sup>16</sup> (Figure 2).   |

To test timings I built a tiny cardboard maquette of the set and moved sections in time to the sounds. I played the violin for tracks, and sat at the computer with Bennett throughout the entire period of sound recording, processing and composition. His sonic decisions influenced the whole structure of the film, so that passages he extended musically dominated the film more than my original storyboard indicated. The structure was loose enough to accommodate these changes (Figure 3).

In the early 1990s animator Clive Walley was commissioned by S4C and BBC Bristol to create *Six Divertimenti* in collaboration with six composers. Tom Simmons describes the creation of *Lovesong* (1993) a

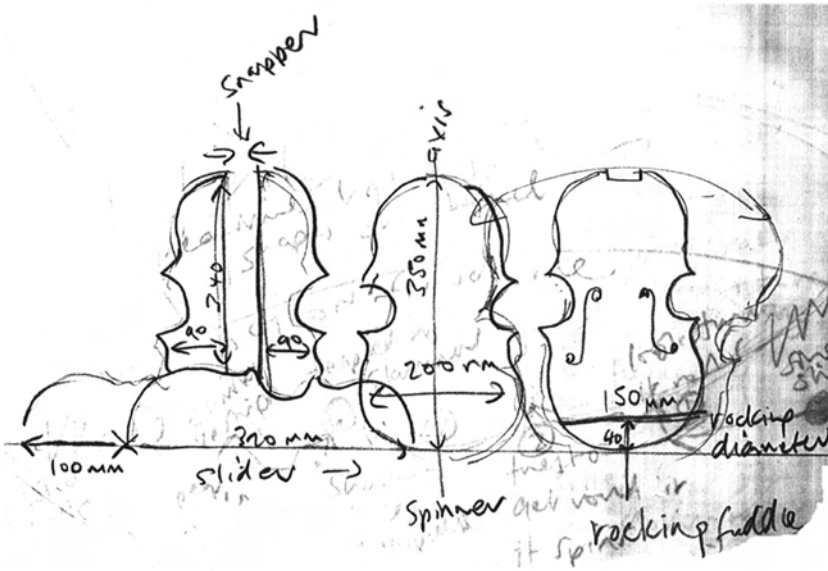


Figure 2: Paganini's Dream Set Plan (Suzie Hanna). Snapping Rocking Sliding and Spinning fiddles, a maquette of the set was used to time the sound design before any animation was made.



Figure 3: Paganini's Dream Puppet and Set (Suzie Hanna). The violin instrument is used to create the physical environment as well as the entire soundtrack for this animation.

collaboration with Dave Usher (harmonica), the second in a series. 'Walley made analyses of the breathing of the performer, the meter bars on the recording desk and of a hand dance to the melodic phrases of a harmonica track which were then visually interpreted in layers of animated paint on glass'<sup>17</sup> (Figure 4).

18 *Animated 2 Clive Walley Space Time and Paint* BBC broadcast 04.04.1995.

19 Panushka C. 1999 speaking at the Art & Animation Symposium ICA London.



Figure 4: Love Song Score Example (Tom Simmons). The composer has written visual cues onto this score to instruct the musician performing live as the film is projected.

Walley's experience of collaboration with different composers in the creation of this series varied greatly. He said:

A composer like Jochen Eisentraut isn't providing background music for my painting and I'm not illustrating his composition. What we're working towards is a fusion of sound and image into something new.<sup>18</sup>

The resulting film *Life Forms* reflects this intense collaborative process, every slight movement of the graphic elements is accompanied by the same sense of motion and density in the soundtrack, as well as a shared level of artistry, painting and music. This area of animation practice, as with Fischinger and McLaren, is still described as 'visual music', in which animators 'strive to allow us to see the invisible that we had only previously been able to hear'<sup>19</sup> but in Walley and Eisentraut's film it results from collaboration rather than interpretation.

Animator Kayla Parker often creates her own soundtracks, but has also moved into the arena of collaborative film and sound as installation material. I asked her about her experience of collaborative practice in Autumn 2006 and she made these comments:

I'll use as an example 'Verge', a recent animated film installation made for The Salt Gallery in Cornwall: It's a dual screen work which I made in collaboration with Stuart Moore. We created the concept for the work together – in other words, we agreed what the film would be 'about' during the research and development stage, what the experience would be for the viewer, the visual impact and aural environment, and so on. Then when we came to actual production, I created the Super 16 image loops, Stuart sculpted the

sound design. This ‘making’ phase was very intense and took place over about a week, with us practically working side by side. During post-production we worked together on the synthesis of the image and sound elements, and on the staging in the gallery. In the final piece the momentum is sometimes driven by the image stream from the two screens, at other times the sound leads and the animation chases. I think for this type of close and very free collaboration to take place one has to respect and trust the other person utterly – you have to be open and allow creativity to flow back and forth between the generation of the animation and the sound composition.<sup>20</sup>

In 2003 Ann Marie Sirois, a Canadian animator, created an abstract animated film ‘PSSST’ with composer Michel Deschênes.

My film PSSST is made the way the surrealists use to work, called *cadavreexquis*. I did the first part of the animation, and then I passed it to Michel Deschênes, the sound track composer. When Michel received the film, he didn’t know what the visual was. All he knew was that the film was made with abstract paintings, and the first section was two minutes. Under the influence of these images in motion he created the musical accompaniment to the initial cinematography. I told him that I wanted percussion, because he is a percussionist. He had full carte blanche to create the sound track. In keeping with the spirit of the first section of the film, Michel then composed an original percussion piece the same length and sent everything back to me. I then continued the animation of acrylic paintings on paper. Before continuing the animation, I did a sound track analysis, to be sure the number of drawings would match with the timing. I also held to the spirit of the work to that point. Thus, each of us in turn led the way in producing PSSST.<sup>21</sup>

Michel Deschênes had this to say about his part in the same process:

The concept was a give and take so that she would give me two minutes of film and I would put the music in, and then I would supply her two minutes of music and she would put the animation in. We both agreed that we wanted a smooth transition in order for the end result to be one work. I started by focusing on the attacks where the images exploded, using different percussion instruments – some of them handmade, like bamboo chimes. I had carte blanche for the instrumentation so I added everything plus the kitchen sink. After I had recorded the attacks, I wanted somewhat of a recurring melody so I watched the animation and improvised on marimba trying to feel the flow of the pictures. . . . I also played a lot on colours trying to juxtapose different instruments to different colours in the animation.<sup>22</sup>

Tom Hambleton describes the effect thus, ‘The music doesn’t want to be in front or behind but it goes hand in hand. Equal importance, one film, not two separate ones’.<sup>23</sup>

Animator Leigh Hodgkinson and composer Barnaby Templer were commissioned to create a collaborative film, *Matryoshka*, for *Sonimation* in 2001. They chose to make a film about an imaginary gadget and the illustration ‘*Sonimation Speechy*’ depicts their decision process. Barnaby recorded vox

20 Hanna S interview with Kayla Parker 2006.

21 Hanna S interview with Ann Marie Sirois August 2007 (website [www.amsirois.com](http://www.amsirois.com)).

22 Deschênes M quoted by Hambleton T Fantoche Festival lecture 2007.

23 Hambleton T speaking at Fantoche Festival 2007.



The composer Carl Stalling's development of the tick system was created as a result of the need for synchronous sound to be played for animation that had already been filmed. He was unusually knowledgeable about film language and his early experience of composing and performing on the fly as a pianist for the silent film theatre, coupled with a gift for mechanics, brought a truly innovative technique into the animation and sound process that has stayed with us as the indispensable modern click-track. This pushed the boundaries of available technology at the time and its continued influence on the ability of musicians to play consistently and accurately to pre-recorded visuals is extraordinary. The development of lip-synch analysis was driven by animators needing accurate analysis of pre-recorded vocals in order to help to suspend the audience's disbelief when an animated character spoke or sang.

Although it has proved impossible to locate the first ever use of a dope sheet, the enduring legacy of this early graphic innovation remains at the centre of animation production for the same reasons today. [The graphic translation of sound into 'frames' that can represent an exact number of drawings or filmed images makes accurate animation possible.] In the case of lip-synched animation, and despite the invention of real-time voice recognition software, most vocal information still ends up on the dope sheet even if software has been used in the translation process.

The Fleischers' invention of rotoscoping was motivated by similar intentions, to create 'realism' in the animated film. Although their ambition applied to performance generally rather than specific musical interpretation, rotoscoping was used by them to promote musical performance, and, in digital form, it continues to be a common element in the modern animator's techniques.

Oskar Fischinger's adaptations of machines in order to analyse sound more accurately, and his use of diverse materials to create responsive animations from musical stimuli, created new aesthetic standards for animators, and like McLaren's and Lye's direct animations onto film stock, they could be seen as being innovative in terms of interpretative practice.

All these animators sought to embrace a shared vocabulary through inventive visual practice based on musical structures. Fischinger's influence on the composer John Cage is significant, the way Cage describes his first percussive experiments reflects something of Fischinger's own geometric approach to image making.

The music video format gives animators great freedom of expression and the director may collaborate with the artist or, as in Gondry's oeuvre, reflect aspects of the music closely in the content or structure of the film.

Whereas past masters of 'optical poetry' or visual music' tended towards creating animation screen language that interpreted pre-recorded music in non-linear and 'spontaneous' expression, the contemporary animator may engage in a live discourse with the composer/sound designer throughout the creative process. Animators and composers involved in small independent productions continue to create original graphic objects for communicating their ideas to each other, and to investigate working methods that may be seen as developing and employing shared vocabularies.



## Glossary

- click track – a series of audio cues used to synchronize sound recordings, sometimes to accompany a moving image.
- dope sheet – also known as an exposure or ‘x’ sheet is a form that is used to plan an animation frame by frame in relation to the soundtrack.
- lip-synch – to move the lips in synchronisation with recorded speech or song; in animation this refers to facial expression of the invented character. (In live action film this can relate to accuracy of vocal dubbing.)
- musical bar sheets – traditional manuscript paper for scoring music to be read by musicians and conductors.
- rotoscoping – a method of traditional animation invented by Max Fleischer in 1915, in which animation is ‘traced’ over projected film footage of actors and scenery. This process has been adapted through digital technology and a recent example can be found in Richard Linklater’s 2006 film *A Scanner Darkly*.
- visual music – a term used to describe the attempts of animators to convey musical expression through usually abstract visual means. With reference to Oskar Fischinger’s work in particular, the term ‘Optical Poetry’ although referring more specifically to the creation of patterns and gestures, can be seen as a close relation.

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## Contributor details

Suzie Hanna is a practising animator who collaborates with other artists in the course of her work. She contributes to conferences, acts as a consultant for animation productions and has curated programmes for film festivals. She is involved in collaborative projects involving education and industry and collaborative international practice. Recent Filmography (2007) – Suzie Hanna has recently collaborated with composer Tom Simmons to create a short mixed-media animated film ‘*The Girl Who Would Be God*’ for the Sylvia Plath 75th Year Symposium (Oxford October 2007). This film was commissioned by Dr. Sally Bayley (Oxford University) and Dr. Kathleen Connors (University of Indiana) and is based on Plath’s previously unpublished drawings and paintings, her journal of November 13th 1949, a selection of her juvenilia poetry and her early musical influences. (2001) – *The Lines* mixed media typographic animation, collaboration with composer Sebastian Castagna, co-animator Hayley Winter and Poet Laureate Andrew Motion. Screened Feb 2001 at Sonimation Launch, Norwich Arts Centre, and at Institut d’Arts Visuel, Orleans March 2001, as part of the Ateliers de Mars. Selected for Matita Film Festival Italy 2001, Leipzig Film and Animation Festival Germany 2001, Hamburg KurzFilm Festival 2002, Tampere 2003 and many other festivals. Toured with Sonimation films at regional and national cinemas 2001. Screened in

Digital competition at Clermont Ferrand Festival 2002, toured with band 'The Gene' 2001 (selected by the Hallowe'en Society). Continues to be selected for festival screenings. 2006 'The Lines' is critically referenced and images from it printed in Paul Wells' article, 'Literary theory, Animation and the 'Subjective Correlative': Defining the Narrative World in Brit-Lit Animation', published in 'Animated Worlds' in 2006 Ed S Buchan, John Libbey Publishing. Selected for screening at a Symposium on Animated Texts at NIAF 2006 by Dr. Suzanne Buchan. She gave a paper at Bristol Narrative Non Narrative Anti Narrative conference 2006 on which this article is based, and also gave a paper 'Women, Creativity and Publishing' at the Women's History Network Conference at Southampton University in 2005, and contributed material to *Fundamentals of Animation*, Paul Wells, AVA, June 2006. It contains images from my own films as reference for independent mixed-media and fine art animation, stills from 'Faisal and Friends' (on which I was a series consultant) as well as significant quotes from the essays which I supplied for the publication. Contact: Suzie Hanna, Senior Lecturer in Animation, Norwich School of Art and Design, Francis House, 3-7 Redwell Street, Norwich, NR2 4SN, UK. E-mail: s.hanna@nsad.ac.uk

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# Voices from the Blue Nile: Using digital media to create a multilayered associative narrative

**Judith Aston** *University of the West of England*

## Abstract

*This article outlines work in progress in relation to a collaborative project between me as a multimedia designer and Oxford anthropologist, Professor Wendy James. The aim of the collaboration is to explore new possibilities for using digital media to create a multilayered associative narrative. The article describes our ideas about how computers can be used to combine, recombine and juxtapose moving image clips alongside photographs and sound clips to convey ideas about landscape, memory, continuity and change in relation to a long-term ethnographic study of upheaval and displacement. It makes the assertion that, by using techniques of on-screen juxtaposition and enabling users to interact with the materials presented, powerful new possibilities can be created through which to communicate ideas and arguments. In looking at these possibilities, the article describes what has been achieved to date, considers key sources of inspiration, makes suggestions for further research, and contextualises the work within the fields of anthropology and documentary studies.*

## Keywords

anthropology  
new media  
interactive narrative  
documentary  
spatial montage  
juxtaposition

## Introduction

This article outlines a collaboration between me as a multimedia designer and Oxford anthropologist, Professor Wendy James. The collaboration draws on my own work in the application of innovative multimedia methods within the field of anthropology and James's anthropological study on the impact of war and displacement on the Uduk-speaking people of the Sudan/Ethiopian borderlands. The article describes some of our early multimedia experiments relating to the anthropology of emotion, the impact of these experiments on the work in which we are currently engaged, and our plans for further development. The key themes of landscape, language and memory, which have emerged through this work, are examined in relation to new possibilities afforded by computers for combining, recombining and juxtaposing moving image clips, photographs and audio recordings in order to create a multilayered associative narrative. In looking at these possibilities, key sources of inspiration are considered along with the wider implications of this research to the fields of anthropology and documentary studies.

## Early experiments

My work with Professor James began in the late 1990s as a case study for my PhD thesis on the potential of interactive multimedia for communicating

1 Funded by the FDTL program and co-ordinated by the Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing, University of Kent at Canterbury. <http://www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/>. The aim of the project was to develop experience based teaching units to help students explore the relationship between field data and analysis as reported in monographs and journal articles.

2 In her article, James makes an implicit plea to resist reductionism of either the biopsychological or culturalist kind, in favour of taking a 'humanities' approach which treats language as a vehicle of conscious and self-critical enquiry into the common roots of feeling and experience. This approach is key to the way in which we continue to develop our collaborative work.

3 James' supervisor during much of her apprenticeship in Social Anthropology was Evans Pritchard, whose belief that social anthropology is closer to social history than to social science has had a lasting influence on her work.

4 This account was based on fieldwork conducted between 1965 and 1969 when James was working as a lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Khartoum.

anthropological ideas and arguments. As part of a HEFCE-funded project 'Experience-Rich Anthropology',<sup>1</sup> James and I explored ways in which interactive multimedia could be used as an alternative to written text or ethnographic film within anthropological discourse. The focus for this collaboration was an academic article written by James on 'The Names of Fear' (James 1997) based on her ongoing fieldwork with the Uduk-speaking people of the NE Sudan. The aim of the article was 'to consider different ways of approaching the ethnographic description and anthropological analysis of emotion,'<sup>2</sup> with particular reference to 'fear' as conceptualised by the Uduk' (ibid 1). Focusing on the study of language as a vehicle of conscious and critical self-enquiry, the article drew upon concrete examples to show how Uduk concepts of fear change through time. These examples were taken from written transcriptions of interviews recorded on camera and were used to illustrate ways in which the Uduk use language as a living means of discourse to shape events and experience into memory and to build expectations for the future.

The argument as presented in the article built on the fact that James has been engaged in anthropological fieldwork with the Uduk people of the Sudan since the mid-1960s. When she began this fieldwork, the Uduk were living as subsistence farmers in small hamlet communities. In her first written ethnography on the Uduk, she describes how she was forcibly struck by the importance of the past to them,<sup>3</sup> This caused her to challenge the conventions of traditional ethnography and to publish a written ethnography which explored the link between past and present within Uduk society (James 1979:vii-viii),<sup>4</sup> Since publishing this ethnography, the outbreak of civil war in the Sudan has caused Uduk life to change drastically. In 1987, the Uduk were forced to leave their hamlets, as many of them were burnt down by the Sudanese forces and their armed militia among the local nomad Arabs. This initial disruption was followed by a series of further displacements across Ethiopia and the Sudan. Although many of the Uduk died during this time, most of the survivors were living as refugees in Ethiopia up to early 2007, by which time significant numbers had been repatriated following the 2005 peace agreement in the Sudan.

In 'The Names of Fear', James looked at the different ways in which the Uduk talk about the civil war and displacement, recognising the importance of 'the visual aspect of facial expression and bodily movement, the aural aspect of pace and breath and tone of voice, and the context of live social interaction' (ibid 124). In order to take these aspects into account, she included some reference to the filming of a Disappearing World documentary (MacDonald 1993) as a supplementary 'ethnographic source' (ibid 124), as well as references to her own video footage taken two years after the event. However, given that the article was published in print form, she had to rely on her own and others' verbal descriptions of the event, and audio recordings of their reflections upon it. She acknowledged this as a problem within the article, stating that 'the discussion of emotion, culture and language is greatly hampered by the format of written ethnography alone, and even by the written version of the recorded and translated vernacular' (ibid 124). This was a source of frustration, as James has

always collected audio recordings, film and video footage, and photographs to complement her written fieldwork notes.

Through our collaboration, we explored a range of ways in which aspects of the written article could be transposed into a multimedia format. The aim was to produce a series of experimental prototypes, in order to consider a range of possibilities for further development. Four possibilities were explored: using moving image clips to illustrate the original article which remained unchanged; maintaining the linear structure of the original article whilst editing the text and moving image clips to increase their co-dependence; combining the moving image clips with other fieldwork data to create a separate presentation which could support, enhance or even challenge the arguments in the published article; using techniques of moving-image juxtaposition to make visual comparisons which conveyed aspects of the argument presented in the written article. The conclusion drawn from these experiments was that the fourth approach offered the most fruitful ground for further exploration, as moving-image juxtaposition was an effective means through which to make visual comparisons across time and to convey multiple points of view relating to a single event.

Three sets of moving image juxtaposition arising from this work became the starting point for further work. The first of these showed how Uduk concepts of fear change through time. In the first of these clips an Uduk woman talks about the recent shooting of her brother by rebel soldiers; in the second another Uduk woman talks about her fears/worries in relation to the less recent disappearance of her daughter; and in the third an Uduk man describes a past time when hysteria had set in among a group of refugees. The tone of the first clip is factual, that of the second clip is reflective, and that of the third clip is humorous. These clips were placed alongside each other within a single screen with the caption: 'The Uduk speak about their recent history of displacement in three ways.' Underneath the left hand clip was written 'factually', underneath the middle clip 'reflectively' and underneath the right hand clip 'humorously'. A control panel was added for each clip whereby the clips could be played individually or simultaneously. Any of the video clips could be paused at any point, enabling comparisons to be made on a frame-by-frame basis. Individual clips could also be enlarged and watched with subtitles. The clips were initially presented on pause mode, to enable the caption to be read before watching the moving images.

Whilst this technique of juxtaposition enabled the presentation of a discrete idea, incorporating this idea into the presentation of an argument would require the integration of these moving image clips into a larger system. It was therefore necessary to look for other instances in which moving image clips could be juxtaposed to meaningful effect. Three clips were selected which showed different points of view on the situation which led to a violent incident in the Ethiopian refugee camp, as described in James's article. Placing these clips side-by-side and adding the descriptive caption 'Different points of view in the run-up to the violent incident at Karmi', made the point that there were very real tensions between these groups of people. It also illustrated how the Uduk and Nuer were

5 James (forthcoming), *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

encroaching on each other's space, with the moving image clips once again being core to the presentation of the idea.

Two further clips were selected which showed women grinding maize in the home village in the 1960s and in the Ethiopian refugee camp in the 1990s. The following caption was written: 'Resettlement in Bonga has provided an opportunity to regain some stability' and the captions: 'Wakacesh 1966' and 'Bonga 1994' were placed under the respective moving image clips. Placing these clips side-by-side and adding a descriptive caption made the point that there were aspects of daily life that had remained constant despite all the upheavals. These three sets of juxtapositions were then linked together through a simple menu-based interface. In so doing, the moving image clips had become central to the presentation of a series of discrete but interlinked ideas, as opposed to being an illustrative adjunct to ideas presented through text.

The next stage was to explore ways in which these techniques of juxtaposition might be combined in order to make a more rounded argument. The question to be explored was whether the careful selection and authorship of moving image-led juxtapositions with text captions would be sufficient in itself to present an argument, or whether more information would be needed to help guide users through these materials. If required, this guidance could either be provided through the use of voiceover or supporting text screens within the multimedia presentation itself or it could be achieved through cross-referencing to other related texts. We also wanted to broaden out the scope of the on-screen juxtapositions to enable photographs and audio clips from James's archive to be included in the process. James's current project of writing a book to complete a trilogy of ethnographic studies based on her research in the Sudan<sup>5</sup> has provided an ideal opportunity through which to explore these possibilities in more depth.

## Current research

My current post-doctoral research with Professor James is directly building on the ideas relating to juxtaposition developed within my PhD thesis. James's forthcoming book focuses on two key anthropological themes. The first of these relates to the negotiation of boundaries across geographical space and historical time, as one regime takes over from the other and redefines the ground upon which individual and group rights, potential security and obligations to authority are staked. The second, linked, anthropological theme is the extraordinary moral robustness of the human being in the face of these events and transformations, and the extent to which continuing cultural resources of language, a sense of identifying individual and group life histories, shared notions of life and death, and of the nature of trust or the lack of trust within human relations, play a role in shaping that robustness. Landscape is key to these themes, as one of the relatively secure points in continuing social memory refers to the specific geography of the borderland, with the mountain topography of sharp escarpments, outlying hills and deep valleys leading up to the Ethiopian highlands having played a crucial role in the shaping of events of war and refuge.

Some particular places, especially sites of refuge, are mentioned by the Uduk in today's accounts of events as they are in older stories of the

nineteenth century, with memories of a shared, very local, moral geography forming a significant part of conversation even in the wider diaspora of the displaced. The book intends to tell the story of what has happened to villages, communities and families from places James first knew in the 1960s, caught up in successive waves of military struggle and now widely dispersed. In addition to providing a detailed account of the impact of externally driven political and military projects upon the region, the book will make a contribution to the growing literature on war and violence, particularly focusing on the resilience of individuals, the active role of shared memory, and the vitality of the vernacular language in making it possible to recreate social lives and networks in new places.

In parallel to the writing of this book, I am collating clusters of sound, still and moving image materials from James's fieldwork data in order to explore ways in which these themes can be presented within a multimedia format. This work is proceeding in an experimental manner, with a view to creating a multilayered associative narrative, which allows users to navigate through and interact with clusters of audiovisual materials presented as a series of on-screen juxtapositions. The intention is that the multimedia presentation will convey a sense of the resilience of the Uduk-speaking people by making on-screen comparisons across time to show aspects of continuity as well as change. In developing these experiments, I am drawing as much on antecedents from literature, film and painting as on extant digital media practice. In particular, the rich multilayered narratives of Shakespeare are a source of inspiration, as are Eisenstein's theories about montage as a means of using film to convey universal human themes (Eisenstein 1969). For example, the multiple displacements that the Uduk have suffered since the mid-1980s create a complex web of loss and reunion, by which parallels can be drawn with Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (Shakespeare 1604). Likewise, Eisenstein's categories of rhythmic, tonal, atonal and intellectual montage (Eisenstein 1969) offer rich possibilities for considering techniques through which to represent the impact of this journey on-screen.

In looking at multilayered narratives, my intention is to produce nested layers of interlinked multimedia pieces, which individually communicate discrete ideas and arguments and collectively combine to reinforce the themes discussed in the book. The work of information designer, Edward Tufte, is another source of inspiration for this work, in particular his work on design strategies for the arrangement of images as narrative (Tufte 1997). In this work, Tufte illustrates how parallelism can be used to synchronise multiple channels of information, draw analogies and enforce contrasts and comparisons (ibid 103). James and I are exploring ways in which such techniques can be used to highlight aspects of continuity and change among the Uduk from the 1960s to the present day. Likewise, we are experimenting with ways in which Tufte's ideas about the use of multiples as a means of revealing repetition and change, pattern and surprise (ibid 105) can be applied to our work.

The process is very much a two-way collaboration with the ideas being generated from James's writing and my multimedia experiments feeding into each other. To date, I have been working on the development of



on-screen juxtapositions which illustrate a surprisingly robust artistic tradition which is rooted in landscape. The focus for this presentation is the idea that, despite their recent history of multiple displacements, the enjoyment of music and song goes on amongst Uduk-speaking people. By making comparisons across time between cine footage, reel-to-reel recordings and photographs taken in the 1960s, and video footage, cassette recordings and photographs taken in the refugee camps and pockets of resettlement in the USA from the 1990s onwards, the extent of this resilience can be illustrated. This is a resilience that is firmly linked to concepts of the forest and which builds upon the fact that the Uduk often speak and behave as if they were surrounded by thick woodland, tempting them with rich rewards for the skilful hunter or gatherer. This is despite the fact that they have long subsisted mainly upon the hoe cultivation of sorghum, maize, beans and sesame, and the raising of a few cattle, goats, pigs and chickens (James 1988: 27–28). Within this context, serious talk on almost any topic of human affairs is likely to lead back at least implicitly to the forest context whence we came, whether in recent history or in its timeless mythical analogue. An archetypal representation of early origins is the scene of the great dance, the dance in which all animals joined, before our own emergence from their midst (ibid 31–32).

In the 1960s, the Uduk rarely performed the great dance or Barangu but had other forms of dance that were regularly performed, such as the Athele, the Bolshok, and the Dance of the Diviners horns. All of these dances relied upon an ensemble of musicians each playing a separate note using different combinations of long gourd flutes, antelope's horns, wooden flutes, beaten logs and sticks depending on the specific dance. The general pattern was that the musicians would make a central circle with the dances circling round them in an anti-clockwise sweep. The materials through which to make this music came largely from the surrounding forest, and in the current refugee camp in Ethiopia much of this music is now being recreated due to the proximity of woodland and availability of suitable materials. An example of this is the Bolshok, recorded in the 1960s on cine and reel-to-reel in the 1960s and again on video in the 1990s. We are able to present this material on-screen as a set of two moving image juxtapositions plus the accompanying reel-to-reel recording. Even where it has not been possible to directly recreate certain types of music, such as the Athele dance, due to lack of forest access in temporary refugee camps, the Uduk have improvised with bric-a-brac found in such places. An example of this is the use of plastic jerry cans in place of logs. Juxtaposing cine footage and reel-to-reel recordings of the Athele dance in the 1960s with video footage of what can be called the 'jerrycan dance' in the 1990s makes the point that the nature of the music and dancing are very similar.

Another aspect that James and I are considering is the playfulness of music making and dance, and the resonances that exist between nature and human sound making. A good example of this is the frog dance, performed by children in the refugee camp and by children watching a video of this dance on a television screen in a hotel in Rochester USA. James has an audio recording of frogs chanting at dusk from the 1960s, video

footage of children doing the frog dance in the refugee camps in the 1990s and video footage of children in a resettlement in Rochester New York watching this dance on a video and then performing it themselves. When placed together on-screen, these recordings make a powerful and playful point about the resilience of a cultural tradition despite all the upheaval.

## Future plans

James and I presented some examples of on-screen juxtapositions at a recent conference on Anthropology and Sound<sup>6</sup> in which we linked several examples together to present an argument about the interplay between work, music and language among the Uduk.<sup>7</sup> The presentation was a multimedia performance in which James's live commentary was integral to the piece. We now need to consider ways in which this commentary can be transposed into standalone multimedia work. Our aim is to produce a website and interactive CD to complement and extend the ideas presented in James's forthcoming book. We are developing this work in two stages. Firstly audiovisual materials from James's archive will be presented as a series of clips organised by themes such as environment and landscape, songs, dances and storytelling. These will be designed to be viewed as discrete clips to directly illustrate text passages from the book and will be presented as a website.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, combinations of photographs, moving image and audio clips will be presented as a series of on-screen juxtapositions organised in a series of themed clusters. Users will be able to move freely between these clusters or along pre-defined pathways. It may be that this second stage will be presented on a CD, if current technical limitations of the internet for enabling users to interact with high-quality audiovisual materials which need to be played simultaneously cannot be overcome. The key challenge in this second stage will be to provide sufficient context to these materials without losing the immediacy of the presentation of the materials themselves. We are also considering possibilities in the longer-term for putting some of these materials into an exhibition/gallery environment, as we feel that they offer rich scope for presentation within an installation context.

## Wider implications

This work has clear implications for helping to bring Visual Anthropology more into the mainstream of anthropological discourse, a sub-discipline which has long been dominated by ethnographic film-making. In his book, *Transcultural Cinema*, MacDougall expresses his frustration with the dominant conventions in film editing which have set up a tension between maintaining 'the forward impetus of film' and providing enough contextual information for the 'central narrative or argument to make sense' (MacDougall 1998: 216). As result of these conventions, he describes how few shots are used in their entirety, with most being 'shot long and cut short' (ibid 210). This has led to a situation within film-making in which 'as the film becomes shorter, the analysis becomes cruder' compromising 'excess meaning', 'interpretative space', 'sense of encounter' and 'internal contextualisation' (ibid 216). His hope is that changing communicative structures afforded by developments in technology and by accordant shifts

6 *Sound and Anthropology: Body, Environment and Human Sound Making*, 19th–21st June 2006, University of St.Andrew's.

7 Aston, Judith and James, Wendy, *Social Sounds: Collaborative Rhythms in Work, Music and Language Among Uduk Speaking People (Ethiopia)*, 2006, Paper written to accompany multimedia presentation at Sound and Anthropology conference On-line publication forthcoming.

8 See: [www.voicesfromthebluenile.org](http://www.voicesfromthebluenile.org) for further details.

in viewing practices will open up new possibilities for ethnographic film (ibid 222). He places this hope within the wider context of what he describes as being the development of a new field of 'experiential studies' in anthropology in which individuals are seen as 'responding creatively to an open-ended set of possibilities rather than being bound by a rigid framework of cultural constraints' (ibid 271–272). The collaborative work described in this article is making a contribution to these debates, one which I believe to be of relevance not only to anthropology but also to the wider field of documentary studies.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined work in progress in relation to a collaborative project to explore new possibilities for using digital media to create a multilayered associative narrative. The approach taken in this collaboration has been to consider how computers can be used to combine, recombine and juxtapose moving image clips alongside photographs and sound clips to convey ideas about landscape, memory, continuity and change in relation to a long-term ethnographic study of upheaval and displacement. The assertion is that, by using techniques of on-screen juxtaposition and enabling users to interact with the materials presented, powerful new possibilities can be created through which to communicate ideas and arguments. The key to successfully illustrating this assertion lies in further exploration of the possibilities for privileging spatial montage over sequential montage that are afforded by computers, with a particular focus on developing a fluid interface through which a lyrical and immersive approach to the presentation of content can be achieved.

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### Contributor details

Judith is a specialist in digital media practice and cross-cultural communication. She holds a PhD in computer-related design from the Royal College of Art and a Masters degree in the social sciences from the University of Cambridge. Her teaching and research interests look at the inter-relationships between sound, text and image within digital media and at the possibilities of digital media for communicating multiple points of view. She began producing digital work with the BBC and Cambridge University in the mid-1980s and has worked across academia and industry ever since. This includes work with Apple Computing, IBM, the BBC, Virgin Publishing, Cambridge Multimedia, Oxford University, the University of Kent and the University of Colorado. She has also been a new media consultant to the Soros Open Society Institute in Budapest and the recipient of an AHRC small research grant. She gave a keynote address on Spatial Montage and Anthropological Discourse at a symposium in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, Spring 2006, and was an invited speaker on the theme of Landscape, Language and Memory at a symposium in Bristol organized by the LAND2 research group, Summer 2006. She also presented her recent work at a Conference on Anthropology and Sound at the University of St. Andrew's, June 2006, and at a workshop on Dance and the European Encounter at the European Association of Social Anthropologists Biennial Conference, September 2006. Contact: Dr. Judith Aston, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of the West of England, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of the West of England, Kennel Lodge Road, Bristol BS3 2JT, UK.  
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# Consequences and coincidences: A case study of experimental play in media literacy

**Shawn Sobers** *Firstborn Creatives, University of the West  
of England*

## Abstract

*This article will discuss the way children across three schools in Bristol, United Kingdom have been engaged in a unique short film experiment. The video project they were involved with aimed to inspire the young participants to actively consider notions of storytelling, spoken language and narrative structure. The article challenges narrative conventions and the way audiences read film; asking how much audiences make their own connections of received messages to create their own narrative structures, and how much control producers have over this process. It goes on to argue the importance of Community Media educational activity in research culture and also highlight the potential of media literacy activity as being a conduit in schools to enhancing learning in non-arts subjects.*

## Keywords

participatory media  
media literacy  
straight-narrative  
disruptive-narrative  
community media  
educational activity

## Introduction

[T]he reader plays a text as one plays a game: s/he voluntarily accepts the rules of the text in order to participate in the practice that those rules make possible and pleasurable; the practice is, of course, the production of meanings and identities (Fiske 1999: 230).

Inside primary and secondary schools across the United Kingdom, digital media technologies are increasingly being applied to the learning process, with creativity fast becoming seen as a key conduit to how young people learn across all curriculum subjects, not only in art, media and design (Sinker 2000: 187–191; Buckingham 2007: 14–30). Championing the use of media tools and participatory models of working in schools are the film-makers, artists, youth workers, producers and other facilitators working in the sector loosely known as Community Media.<sup>1</sup> Community Media can broadly be defined as a loose structure of independent agencies and individuals working on media-related broadcast, transmission and educational activities at a community level. The work taking place in Community Media consists of two distinct channels in relation to their main areas of emphasis; *Communication Platforms* and *Educational Activities*. The former are primarily concerned with providing access to broadcast/transmission platforms, in many ways emulating the structures and platforms of traditional mass media, (e.g. community TV and radio stations). The latter are primarily concerned with enabling participants to

1 Other names for participatory approaches to media production are wide-ranging, including; *hands-on media education, consumer-grade video, public access media, community-based media, participatory media* (all in Halleck 2002), *Inclusion through media* (Dowmunt et al. 2007), through to the Web 2.0 mutation of the practice with notions of *User Generated Content*. The approach of my ongoing research has been to firmly position this activity within the Community Media identity.

- 2 Creative Partnerships is a government scheme in the United Kingdom funded by the Arts Council of England which promotes creative approaches to teaching and learning and links schools with creative practitioners.
- 3 Schools had to apply to take part in the residency.
- 4 The author of this article is a company director of Firstborn Creatives and was directly involved in the running of this project as Project Manager. Two facilitators were employed to run the actual contact sessions. The residency only required Firstborn Creatives to work with the two primary schools, but for the project described in this article Hartcliffe Secondary were brought in as the third school. For the remainder of the residency Hartcliffe School worked with Knowle West Media Centre, which was the original plan. The other media companies involved were Calling the Shots and Suited & Booted. For more info see: [www.firstborn-creatives.co.uk](http://www.firstborn-creatives.co.uk). Accessed 1st December 2007.
- 5 'The Media Literacy Task Force was founded by the UK Film Council, Channel 4, the BBC and the BFI and launched by the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport at a seminar in January 2004 entitled "Inform

access production equipment, supporting them to produce their own work for either future media aspirations (Media Education), or using media as a means of addressing the social and/or pedagogic needs of the participants regardless of their career aspirations (Media Literacy).

Within the framework of this definition, this article will explore a project that would be described as an Educational Activity with a Media Literacy agenda. In 2004 Creative Partnerships Bristol<sup>2</sup> commissioned a digital media initiative involving four local community media organisations to work in a residency capacity with eleven schools over the period of an academic year.<sup>3</sup> The video project described in this paper, *Brief Consequences*, was just one of many productions made during the year long residency.

The aim of the residency was to engage school staff and children in using media technologies to enhance the curriculum, and to constructively agitate the culture of the schools in exploring new ways of working. The project described in this article was undertaken by one of the companies involved in the residency, Firstborn Creatives, and their work with Oldbury Court Primary, Hillfields Primary and Hartcliffe Secondary schools.<sup>4</sup> Six children from each school worked on the production; their ages were 9 and 10 years in the primary schools, and 11–13 years in the secondary. From the outset of the residency the head teachers of the primary schools expressed a desire for the project to, in part, address issues of literacy within their schools, and with this in mind the project held as its central concern ideas surrounding storytelling, creative writing and role play. We saw this project as an innovative, playful way of using media production as a means of inspiring (by stealth) the children to take an interest in writing, spoken language and story structure, thus working towards the media literacy agenda for young people to 'understand, access and create' media on their own terms (Livingstone 2005a: 10). Or, as described by the *Media Literacy Task Force*:<sup>5</sup>

Although the 24/7 media environment in which we live means that most people are already avid media consumers, this doesn't necessarily give us all the skills to understand, or question it, or the know-how to use it to express our own ideas. And as media outputs proliferate, we need to be ever more aware of alternative and culturally diverse sources of stories, ideas and information. A media literate society is therefore not a luxury, it is a necessity in the 21st Century. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The campaign for media literacy to become part of the national curriculum is growing steadily in the United Kingdom, and now there is also an *Associate Parliamentary Media Literacy Group*<sup>7</sup> researching into the issue and advocating on behalf of the Task Force and other stakeholders. The efforts of the Task Force are commendable in promoting what the majority of media educationalists and practitioners have always known, that the process of media production and deconstruction has the potential of containing high educational value across the curriculum, now more than ever in the climate of pervasive media messages, gadgets and flow of information (Buckingham 2007: 180). The true agenda of media literacy

however, is not about narrow media training or skills, but more about the wider awareness of the world around us.<sup>8</sup>

As a company which made a conscious decision in the past seven years to produce media in participatory community contexts in addition to commercial commissions such as television programmes, Firstborn Creatives were passionate about the methodological approach of working with media to further certain particular social agendas, although at the same time aiming to keep production values and quality equal to mainstream production. On this basis, Firstborn Creatives were approached by the director of the Brief Encounters Short Film Festival to run a young person's film project to screen at the festival. Seeing it as an opportunity to build on the partnership ethos of the residency, the Brief Consequences project was devised and the three schools brought together.

This article will describe the process of the project and explore how the production approach impacted on the narrative outcome of the work. The narrative content of the production outcome will be deconstructed and it is argued that connections of narrative are as much in the mind of the viewer as they are in the conscious construction of texts. The article will conclude with a debate on the role media literacy can play in the education system and the lessons of such an approach for mainstream filmmaking.

The project described in this article was not originally devised as a research study, but it was felt that the process and outcomes were worthy of academic scrutiny and exploration. The references of this exploration are rooted primarily in anecdotal sources rather than from a detailed evaluative study, and the descriptions are concerned with practice rather than theoretical analysis. For this reason, the article will draw attention to possible further areas of research, particularly in relation to media literacy activities with young people in the areas of representation, gender stereotyping and power relations. As an emerging area of academic research,<sup>9</sup> analysis of community media educational activities often generates more questions than answers. As a practice which often involves working with young people in sensitive situations, more questions than answers may be a healthy intervention for this specific area of the wider community media sector at this stage of its development.

In a time when technology has allowed a broader range of access to information than at any other time in history, (Gillmor 2004: 23–43), with many now one step closer media production technologies, albeit at a domestic not professional level, and the internet allowing even wider access to the means of exhibition or distribution networks, the community media education sector has found the need to embrace and negotiate these technological revolutions (Jones 2006: 16), in order to enhance and position their activities with the aim of meeting the multiple and diverse agendas of literacy education, short film form, and democracy in informal learning,<sup>10</sup> and maintaining quality within participatory arts practice.

In Marxist terms, to engage in Community Media is a political act, as its principles lie in giving access of [media] tools of power (the means of representation) (Hall 1992: 87), to the powerless (the people). The use of new media technologies in community/participatory contexts is therefore

and Empower: Media Literacy in the 21st century". The role of the Task Force was to respond proactively to the provisions in the Communications Act to "promote media literacy". Taken from [www.medialiteracy.org.uk/taskforce/](http://www.medialiteracy.org.uk/taskforce/). Accessed 1st December 2007.

- 6 [www.medialiteracy.org.uk/medialiteracy/](http://www.medialiteracy.org.uk/medialiteracy/). Accessed 1st December 2007.
- 7 Led by Danny Alexander, Labour MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey. For more info see: [www.apmlg.org.uk](http://www.apmlg.org.uk). Accessed 1st December 2007.
- 8 It has been argued that the term 'media literacy' is not helpful as it suggests a sector rather than an interest in wider pedagogy. See Sobers (2005: pp. 84–86). Also Buckingham (2007: pp. 47–48). Interestingly, the advent of the new 14–19 Creative & Media Diplomas that will commence in many UK schools from 2008 may make the media literacy campaign either even more poignant, or completely redundant. At time of writing (2007) it is too early to make a judgement.
- 9 Here I am not referring to the wider and well-established research into Community Media in the sense of community radio and television stations, (Communication Platforms) which has a long history. Here



I mean the emergence of research specifically looking at informal media educational activities separate from training for a community platform, which is where most educational references in community media has previously resided.

- 10 Aiming to maintain a democratic approach in such community media projects is a desire to be constantly working towards, even when working in formal education institutions. Jeffs, T., Smith, M. (1999).
- 11 Tomas Rawlins from Plug-in Cinema – [www.plugininema.com](http://www.plugininema.com) – Accessed 1st December 2007. Quote taken from impromptu speech he gave at Community Media Day at the Cube Microplex in Bristol, UK, June 2004.
- 12 The author of this article refuses the often cited claim that process is more important than product in community arts and media, and also refutes that product is more important than process. In my experience the ethics of community development work is for process and product to be regarded on equal merit.
- 13 Watch the full film at: [www.cmsw.co.uk/cmsw-tv.html](http://www.cmsw.co.uk/cmsw-tv.html). Accessed 1st December 2007.

to work towards levelling the playing field and ‘closing the gap between the reporters and the reported’.<sup>11</sup> It is not the claim of this study that the particular project described was overtly political or a radical act, but what is argued in the section *Beyond the Project* is that the school children involved (and the rest of their class) took an ownership in this production that they would not otherwise have felt, to the extent where they voluntarily and actively engaged in changing the production after it was produced to satisfy their own tastes. This level of empowerment of participants is the holy grail of community media engagement, on a par with the actual practical output of quality work that they are proud of (Jones 2006: 205).<sup>12</sup>

## Creative bad practice

*Brief Consequences* is essentially a video version of a game of consequences, which can be played either using pictures or words. In the pictorial version of the game, a piece of paper is folded into three, and passed to the first person. That person will draw a head in the style of their choosing. They then fold the paper to conceal their drawing and the next person draws a body, and likewise they fold the paper and the third person draws the legs and feet. When the paper is unfolded a humorous disjointed image is revealed (see Figure 1).

In keeping with the spirit of the traditional consequences format, one school (Oldbury Court) were given the first scene of the film to write and shoot, the second school (Hartcliffe) made the middle without knowing what the first school had done, and likewise, Hillfields produced the end. Everything about the process of making this film would be considered ‘*bad practice*’ when judged against traditional film production methodologies, but deliberately so. Rather than having one writing team, there were three separate groups who were not told what other writing had taken place. As with the paper-based version of the game, each group knew which part of the picture they were creating. At the end of filming each section, a Polaroid photograph was taken which showed the context of each last shot. That end image was then passed to the next school, along with a box of props and clothes worn by the two actors, who appeared in all three sections. They were told nothing else about what the preceding group had produced.

The intense production period encouraged a high level of spontaneity amongst the young writing teams and helped them to resist the temptation to try to second guess what had come before. (See Table 1) Each school had two and a half days to produce their section – one day planning/scripting, half day meeting the actors and briefing, and one day filming. The rushes were then given to an editor who compiled all three sections together according to clear instructions from the young film-makers. The resulting film is thus a series of fragmented ideas and incidents which are not linked, but are retrospectively made sense of by the existence of consistencies and coincidences. Here follows is a brief description of the film.<sup>13</sup>

### Act One:

An archetypal villain is treating his servant with contempt. Through the window he spots a group of boys walking up the path with their older sister



*Figure 1: Section of poster for the Brief Consequences film screening.*

Jess. He kidnaps the children and Jess runs off in fear. The villain brainwashes the children into working for him, and they go in chase to capture Jess.

Eventually they all come face to face. When Jess confronts the villain, he magically turns her brothers into apples. The graphic 'Game Over' appears on screen, with a computer game sound effect.

Act Two:

Cut to shot of three different boys sat in front of a television with a computer games controller. One of them passes the controller to the boy to his right. We see a close-up of the boy's hands pressing the buttons. Cut to a pixelated screen, suggesting the TV screen. The audience are now in the game. Placed around the screen are graphics of the score, the amount of lives left and a numerical countdown.

Week # / School	Mon	Tues	Wed (half days)	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Week 1 Oldbury Primary	Ideas, scripting and training on equipment		Meet the actors for the first time and rehearse		Filming	
Week 2 Hartcliffe Secondary	Ideas, scripting and training on equipment		Meet the actors for the first time and rehearse		Filming	
Week 3 Hillfields Primary	Ideas, scripting and training on equipment		Meet the actors for the first time and rehearse		Filming	
Weeks 4, 5 and 6	Editing (by freelancer in consultation with the facilitators of the project, according to the editorial decisions of the children.)					Screening at film festival. (Week 6)

Table 1: Production process and schedule.

A girl speaks to camera introducing the instructions. “Welcome to the Dome of Doom. The aim of the game is to free Jess and defeat the Games Master.” We see Jess tied up, trying to get free, and the villain laughing, looking sinister. Between shots of the boys playing the game sat in front of the TV, we see a group of children successfully completing a range of tasks and each time they manage to grab an apple, a child is set free. The villain tries to stop them but fails each time.

Jess is eventually set free, but the villain wrestles her onto the ground and grabs onto her legs, refusing to let her go.

Act Three:

This scene is shot in black & white and references the silent movie genre with the use of intertitles. The audio is from a music box, giving off a delicate fairy-tale quality. We see the villain still clinging onto Jess’s legs, but he looks less sinister. A small girl with wings touches three apples with a wand and a magical chime sounds. The villain and Jess stand up and gaze into each others’ eyes. Hand in hand they skip off. They stand in front of a lake and exchange a paper heart, and look saddened.

Cut to intertitle - “Splash!”

We hear the splash and see the paper heart floating on the water. Jess and the villain are nowhere in sight.

Intertitle - “The End”.

The film contains both ‘straight’-narrative and disruptive-narrative tendencies, some of which were planned (e.g. consistency of the main

characters), and some of which were more unexpected, (e.g. the villain character reaches a point of affection for the female character, moving away from his starting point as blatant aggressor). The straight-narrative reading of the film is one of classic Hollywood romance: two sworn enemies of different sexes eventually become lovers, with a happy, but tragic, ending (Maltby 2005: 222). The disruptive-narrative qualities mainly concern the inconsistency in style throughout, with each act completely different in creative approach, most notably the computer game style in act two and the silent movie approach in act three.

The seemingly logical evolution of the relationship between the adversary and victim throughout the film helps smooth the jarring nature of the conflicting styles, (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 66) though arguably another disruptive quality is the speed at which sworn enemies became tragic lovers, with no hint of such a possible relationship in any of the earlier scenes, with no historical continuity or referencing. The way the film 'makes sense' is a combination of the decisions made in the production process and the ways in which the viewer perceives or creates narrative links (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 66). There are any number of cultural references one could make in determining how such a film is read by the audience, and also assumptions on why the young film-makers made their narrative decisions (see Table 2).

It is unlikely that summative research or evaluation with the young film-makers at this stage would reveal closer insight into what influenced their story and character decisions, and it is an area of further research that would need to be taken into account in future projects of this kind. *Example 1 – The Love Story* could arguably be a reflection of children's instinctive cultural responses to men and woman that are prevalent in attitudes commonly found in all areas of society that surround them, from the playground to television: namely that woman are safe and can be trusted, and men are strangers and carry a hint of danger (De Zengotita 2005: 196–197).

The *Example 2 – Redemption* also contains the many gender stereotypes that exist in *Love Story*, but with the added element of the socio-economic factor of the villain having a servant at the beginning of the film, and that in the same scene he kidnaps the boys and turns them into apples, which may be read as a continuation of the idea that the villain treats people like property. This reading makes visible the ways in which the 9–10 year-old children who made this section absorb and reflect such socio-economic cultural stereotypes (De Zengotita 2005: 196–197).

The *Example 3 – The Power of Magic* reading is both obvious and complex at the same time. It is obvious in the sense that the magical qualities of the apples throughout may be a result of the fairytale and myth references to apples which most of the children would have been exposed to at some point in their lives through Disney cartoons, storybooks, and so forth, (Fiske 1999: 235; De Zengotita 2005: 33–45). It is complex in the confident and consistent ways in which the apples retained their magic throughout the film, and how neatly that trait interweaves throughout the disruptive-narrative resulting in a twist at the end. For this reason I would argue that the *Brief Consequences* model provides a rich area of debate on

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#### Example 1 – The Love Story

(Act One)

The villain is seen watching Jess through the window. Assuming he will never get close to her, he takes the thing closest to her instead. Her family.

(Act Two)

The villain keeps Jess captive – his only bargaining tool, he thinks, to keep her close is his possession of her brothers.

(Act Three)

The villain sees the error of his ways and Jess sees the true him, and they fall in love. Their previous conflict means their love must remain unrequited, and therefore ends in tragedy.

#### Example 2 – Redemption

(Act One)

The villain is seen treating his staff with contempt, and builds his evil streak by not only kidnapping children but also by transforming them into objects.

(Act Two)

Although the villain tries to exert his power, he is defeated and all his prisoners are set free, leaving him powerless and without allies. The one constant in his life (according to the film) has been Jess, who is about to leave forever.

(Act Three)

He holds onto her, but they both know their love is doomed to failure. He sacrifices himself and his love for otherworldly (eternal) happiness.

#### Example 3 – The power of Magic

(Act One)

The boys are magically turned into apples.

(Act Two)

In the computer game, whenever a player grabs an apple a child is set free.

(Act Three)

When the wand touches each apple a magic sound is produced. The pair fall in love, as if by magic.

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*Table 2: Multiple film readings. Connections, consistencies and coincidences.*

how film-makers and audiences negotiate narrative connections with a game-play quality that resists the tendency to find “truth” in any of the answers it suggests, and reflects just how slippery the idea of a fixed narrative is (Kulick 1994: 282). There are numerous other narrative connections apparent in the project outcomes, such as the psychological aspect of captives falling in love with their captors.

Ultimately this film imparts a sense of ‘storyness’ – a sense of a story and over-arching narrative with linked ideas. American sociologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead wrote, ‘the reporter is generally sent out to get the story not the facts’ (Mead 1926: 390). Likewise, the young film-makers in this project were sent out to create and imagine continuing a story, and not to unearth any ‘truths’ about the characters or to explain anything of the context. In a conventional film the narrative is the holder of the context of truth that was created for that film universe: the film’s diegesis (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 67). The narrative conceals the artifice of the film-making process. Even in the most fantastical films full of

magic realism, it is the narrative structure which decides whether the audience is willing to suspend their disbelief (Conley 2005: 197–215). Part of a narrative's function is carried out by the audience's desire to understand, to look for clues, to make links in consequential logic:

In a text, as in a game, the rules are there to construct a space within which freedom and control of self are possible. Games and texts construct ordered worlds within which the players/readers can experience the pleasures of both freedom and control: in particular, for our purposes, playing the text involves the freedom of making and controlling meanings.

(Fiske 1999: 230)

Creating these meanings 'blind', as did the young film-makers in *Brief Consequences*, does not take away the audience's need to link whatever meanings they can find. However, there are some narrative meanings and 'facts' that an audience could assume exist throughout all three sections of the film. A sample survey of audience responses to what these 'narrative facts' could be resulted in the following common-held suggestions.<sup>14</sup>

- The main male character is bad and should not be trusted.
- The female character is good and deserves our sympathy.
- The brothers are innocent victims.
- The brothers were magically turned into apples, and therefore they needed to be kept safe and rescued.
- Deep down the villain had a soft side.
- The apples retain a magical quality.
- Love conquers all.

These 'facts' are the subjective assumptions of that particular audience on that particular day, but are equally as valid as a completely different set of 'narrative facts' given by a different audience on a different day. Ultimately, the ownership of the reading and meaning of the production has transferred from the film-maker to the audience (Fiske 1999: 62–83), although in this case I would argue in an even more active, participative and playful way than Fiske describes, which appropriately reflects the spirit in which the production was created. Devoid of the luxury of character development and narrative back-story, the young film-makers built the story from the top down, regardless of any ideas of 'fictional truths', and presented it to the unsuspecting audience to find their own way.

The audience ultimately decides how satisfactory they feel the resulting film to be. Audiences' responses suggest that the first time they watch it unawares of the production process; they watch the film and work at following the storyline. The second time they watch it aware, they look for the joins in the different sections, whilst at the same time watching how the storyline adapts and weaves throughout. The audience thus become part of the game, and with repeated viewing take on ownership of how the film is to be read and experienced. With this in mind, *Brief Consequences* highlights how a film is not a closed artefact and its meaning may never be finalised due to the audience's participation in that work's existence.

14 A sample of approximately 15 audience members as asked after the first screening of this work at the Watershed, Bristol, 2004.

- 15 This anecdote is similar to one described in Fisk (1999: 97), based on research by Tulloch and Moran. *A fan of 'A Country Practice' frequently wrote to the producers attempting to influence future scripts. One fan, for example, having heard gossip that Vicky was going to die on her honeymoon, wrote desperately trying to prevent the script being written'.*

Although with film the performances are fixed, it is the audience that gives them life and the narrative relevance – especially in a production where the audience's investment to buy into the process and 'rules' is key (Fiske 1999: 230).

### **Beyond the project (different ways of writing)**

This Brief Consequences project also highlights how the film-makers themselves can join the retrospective process and take double ownership of their work. In the months following the first screening of the work, the children from Oldbury Court Primary School felt an added sense of ownership of the narrative, as they had produced the opening scenes. They admitted to their teacher that they did not like the end of the film, as scripted by children at Hillfields Primary. Their teacher encouraged them to explore their ideas, and the children wrote a number of alternative endings to the film.

This example is evidence of how moving image production and exhibition can be used in education to complete the cycle of inspiration, intrigue and re-inspiration, to generate more interest in creative writing and use of language. At first the teacher was embarrassed to mention it to the project facilitators in the fear that it would cause offence, but it actually provides evidence of how engaged the children were in the process and lengths they were prepared to go to in order to retain their level of ownership.<sup>15</sup>

The Brief Consequences sessions may not have looked and felt like traditional literacy sessions, and that is the attraction of media literacy activities, especially for the children taking part. The strength of using creativity across the curriculum is that it enhances what are traditionally considered as 'non-arts' subjects, expanding opportunities for learning (Crompton 2003). Furthermore the use of digital media in the classroom can help to promote a culture of knowledge exchange between teacher and pupil, allowing the child to develop their own learning, moving them towards becoming confident, literate individuals (Goldfarb 2002: 107–139). However, Buckingham (2007) cautiously points out that technology by itself will not improve education, and it would be misguided to have a '*superficial infatuation with technology for its own sake*'. (viii). Similar arguments are also made in Downmunt et al. (2007: 14). Buckingham then goes on to reason:

[I]n questioning the use of technology in education, it is not my intention to support those who would seek to abandon it in favour of a return to 'basics' – whatever they may be. Many critics of technology in education are inclined to fall back on claims about the 'authentic' and 'natural' ways of learning which have supposedly been displaced by technology, and they also rely on assertions about the 'dehumanizing' effects of particular media that are, to say the least, highly contentious. A great deal of learning involves technology of one form or another (if we grant that the printing press or even the pen are forms of technology); and a great deal of learning is inevitably mediated (again, if we grant that the book - or indeed the curriculum itself – is a medium, a means of representing the world, just like television or the internet). We cannot simply abandon media and technology in education and return to a simpler, more natural time. (ix)

It could be viewed as a challenge to suggest it enhances children's understanding of literacy by using the primarily visual mediums such as video in the classroom, rather than solely relying on the reading and writing of literary texts or listening to spoken word. Advocates of the development of media literacy would argue, however, that this is not a challenge at all, but a fundamental need for all learners, which therefore targets a gap in the current curriculum structure (Livingstone, Van Couvering and Thumim 2005).

## Conclusion

From a non-experimental film perspective, the production process for this project was risky as it was not known what the outcome would be, or if the result would make sense or be appealing. However from the perspective of working with children the approach was perfect, as it was playful and not seen as learning by the participants.<sup>16</sup> This approach also required the children to give over partial ownership of their product and trust not only in each other, but also in two other groups of children they had never met before, which ultimately enhanced their awareness of community and other people's interest in their work.

To heighten the impact of this project in the future, the production could be edited in a number of different ways to let the children decide for themselves how they wish to experience the narrative, which lends itself to an interactive multi media approach. In the following year (2005) we repeated the experiment with the same schools, but this time rather than children being the crew, it was made by groups of teachers, parents and caretakers, heightening the participative nature of the production and enhancing collaborative relations across the school between adults and the children who had worked on the project in the previous year.

Community media and arts often carries the stigma of meaning low quality of the final resolution (Rennie 2006: 91), but that is a myth thankfully being steadily broken with each new project that is carried out by the growing number of media professionals who choose to work in community settings. Much of the work coming out of the community media sector is creating challenging innovative cinematic experiences (Poole 2005), the likes of which would be lauded if in the hands of inventive feature-film directors with large budgets and marketing (Porter 2007: 85).

Research into community media educational activities is an important area for greater scrutiny in the current climate of mass media (especially television industries), which are increasingly developing schemes to inspire young people to pick up video cameras and tell their own stories.<sup>17</sup> Much attention at present in community media educational activity research is concerned with issues of how much impact the activities have on the participant groups, which is of course a valid line of enquiry,<sup>18</sup> but this project shows how much more community media research has to contribute towards social sciences research in the future (Howley 2005: 269).

In many ways grass roots community media production is the prevailing emerging tradition of 'self analysis' ethnographic film-making<sup>19</sup> (Macdougall 1998: 154; Ginsburg 1995: 210–235). Sadly, after the first screenings, community media productions are often left to gather dust on shelves. But with greater analysis of those works therein lies the opportunity for a greater

16 When the concept was first introduced to the class, we asked them if they had any questions and straight away nearly every single hand shot up in the air. Thinking we had not explained it well enough, we asked them what they didn't understand, but it turned out that rather than having questions, they all had story ideas and wanted to share them.

17 In the United Kingdom both BBC and Channel 4 have led practical projects for the Media Literacy Task Force seeing over 3,000 children involved collectively in their School Report and Breaking the News projects, respectively.

18 My own current PhD research into Community Media has as its central concerns impact and motivation.

19 'Self analysis' in the sense of analysing your own communities rather than documenting the 'exotic tribes' of far away lands.



20 Quote taken from interview with Alistair Rzeznicki for my PhD research, 19 April 2007. Alistair was a young person I first taught when he was 13 years old when he joined a media club I ran. He is now 23 and works as a professional editor and camera operator, and runs his own company using media to promote cleanliness in hospitals.

understanding of the power of audience responses, quality, (Rennie 2006: 90–91), narrative forms, play ethics, social participation in civic society, and a whole host of other areas worthy of academic scrutiny. Within the wider context of community research, regarding community radio particularly, research is at a fairly advanced stage, but in the realm of educational activity within community media, this is still a very much emerging research discipline. The evidence of this research is vital in making the claim for the sector having valid pedagogic value, and a strong voice in the development of government policy (Couldry 2007: 254), and for more sustainable funding decisions being made in favour of the sector. Additionally, the ideas that children and young people have need to be heard.

I met this professor at a talk, and he was talking about how kids have no fear and they'll take risks and all this sort of stuff. And he talked about this example of a six year old girl and how in class she was always fidgeting and could never sit still and never listened, until one day they were doing art and she had to draw a picture. She was intently drawing a picture and the teacher saw her and she thought, 'This is the first time I've ever seen her quiet', so she went over to her. The teacher asked, "What are you drawing?", and the girl said, "I'm drawing God." The teacher answered by saying that no one knows what God looks like. The girl answered, "They will in a minute."<sup>20</sup>

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### **Contributor details**

Shawn has worked extensively in the media and arts education sector, primarily in the South West of England. Roles have included Media and Community Education Officer for at-Bristol, and Production Workshop Leader for ITV West. He is the co-founder of Firstborn Creatives production company. In addition to his education work Shawn has also directed broadcast programmes including Unfinished Business (2007 – BBC1, Firstborn Creatives), Under the Bridge (2000 – ITV West, Firstborn Creatives), Footsteps of the Emperor (1999 – ITV West) and assistant producer of Eazy Riders (1997 – Channel 4, Black Pyramid Films). Shawn has a 1st class BA (Hons) in Film and Photography from Newport Film School and studied Anthropology of Media MA at the School of Oriental and African Studies, (SOAS) in London. He is currently undertaking a PhD researching into Community Media educational activities at the University of the West of England, where he is also a Senior Lecturer in Photography and Media. Contact: University of the West of England, School of Creative Arts, Bower Ashton Campus, Bristol, BS3 2JT, UK. E-mail: shawn.sobers@uwe.ac.uk

## The making of *A Story Told* – a film installation for the gallery

Alia Syed *Southampton Solent University*

### Abstract

*A poetic analysis into interior space, a subjective account of how bedtime stories passed on to me from my father inform my most central route into narrative. How my subsequent journeys combine within the geography of the gallery to produce the psychic space that is A Story Told. My analysis revolves around my latest piece – A Story Told a film installation written, directed and performed by the author first shown in The Millais gallery in 2004. The narrative I attempt to elucidate is a pulsing traversing from the space of exhibition to the embodiment of the viewer to the subjective demarcations of making. This nominal movement along a revolving trajectory implies a constant return, an orientation that turns back under dark, Freud's first organism, Plato's cave; the fictive journey that is central to assemblages of self.*

### Keywords

installation  
subjective  
space  
writing  
diaspora  
sculptural  
encounter  
performance  
loop

I lay down and allowed the light to pass over me. I stayed still. I wanted more than anything to stay still, to let things pass over me. I wouldn't tell any more stories, this time I would not need to, because this time was the last time and all the stories had disappeared. 'My kingdom not yours, nor yours mine, we parted'.<sup>1</sup>

As the UK Home Office has stressed on numerous occasions, police will not be given powers to demand ID papers from you as and when a national identity card is introduced. The Home Office has not however shouted quite so loudly about the fact that the Immigration and Nationalities Directorate (IND) has these powers already, and has been busily using them since at least May 2003<sup>2</sup>

I live five minutes from New Cross Gate train station. The station is built on the A2, which is an old Roman road built on Celtic remains: it runs all the way from Dover to central London, connecting roads from Felixstowe, Faversham and Ramsgate, the underbelly of East England. It follows the Thames almost all the way to the sea.

There were many police raids that summer, the tube station was often full of police, we were told they were just Transport Police.

- 1 *A Story Told*, Alia Syed 2004. <http://hidrazone.com>
- 2 [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/09/15/ukis\\_immigrant\\_id\\_trawl/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/09/15/ukis_immigrant_id_trawl/)

- 3 *A Story Told*, Alia Syed 2004.
- 4 Hall Stuart, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

My bones became soft, like Yunis I was washed ashore.

The boat was travelling from Tunis to Cairo and all I can remember was the blue of my father's robe as he threw me into the air. 'Let go', he shouted. 'Let the wind carry you'.<sup>3</sup>

'Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning'.<sup>4</sup> In the closed walls of bedtime stories, in the intimacy of moments; a series of beginnings. We are forced to continually navigate the logic of one world against another.

All my films start in the dark. I stopped writing late that autumn; Guy Fawkes was almost upon us. It was dark, but the main road was lit up with Christmas decorations and Chinese migrants selling light sticks, which were slung across their shoulders, glowing in colours of green, pink and orange. A pound a stick – my daughter looked back, wanting.

My garden backs on to disused land around the railway sidings of New Cross. Much of the land is now taken up by Sainsbury's, but there is a long strip of woodland between the back gardens of our street and the supermarket: a strip of green containing the summer shrieks of children playing. Once, amongst the debris of broken glass, we found two single shoes covered in moss; one a child's, the other adult-sized. The decay connoted a presence far older than the 1960s design of the plimsolls. I became interested in the idea of an 'excavated novel' that would be conveyed by found objects and texts. The novel would be fragmented by the very nature of its retrieval.

Nazia Khaldun is the long lost daughter of Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim jurist and philosopher who travelled the Islamic world from Spain to Egypt to Tunisia. He occupied many positions in many courts. A maverick by nature, he assumed the title of Chief Malakite Judge in the Al-Azhar University in thirteenth century Cairo, where he finally sent notice to his family to join him. According to history they all drowned at sea and he never saw any of them again. Nazia Khaldun is my invention, but by the time I had finished writing, I had decided that the audience didn't need to know what her name was, the encounter was going to take place between 'you' and 'me', so she became nameless again. The part of Nazia Khaldun in *A Story Told* is played by myself, everything that we see in the gallery is either a portrait of Nazia or her point of view. The narrative is told in the first person and addresses 'you'. Nazia Khaldun is cursed to travel through time until she finds her lover, so the address is a plea in the form of a narrative poem to her lover. Although my previous films have all been shown in both cinema and gallery, this is the first piece of work that has been made exclusively for the gallery.

My films usually revolve around short stories written by me. The stories all in some way foreground a question; the character searches for a meaning, a rational to implied events. The images supplied by the pictorial elements of the film are offered as puzzles; they become allegories and can be read tangentially to the voiceover. The stories I write appear almost always as voiceovers. This disembodied voice is often nostalgic, reflecting on events external to the footage shown. The progression of the story splinters, inducing a process in the viewer that is more dependant on

individual utterances than inherited structures of knowledge. The question in *A Story Told* is, 'Are you, the viewer, my lover?' But this time the voice is embodied between the space of the gallery and your entrance into it, a dialogue between her world and yours.

In thinking about the places she would frequent in order for her to fulfil her search, I explored cafés on roads around London, roads that lead to seaports. 'The A2 breaks through the cliffs above Dover Docks before turning 180 degrees and "touching down" on land again at the entrance to the Eastern Docks, where both it and the A20 terminate'.<sup>5</sup>

I have become someone else. I cannot gather myself up. We've come to another end. The car slows down; I give you my letters, but do not wait. I need to keep moving until I'm sure.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually I find it, Neil's Café on Watling Road, somewhere between Gravesend and Rochester. It has huge glass windows looking out onto the A2; she would be able to see the approach of both friends and foe, and survey the traffic coming in and out of the metropolis.

*A Story Told* is a love story; a woman sits in a roadside cafe recounting her quest through time to find perfect union with her lover. The film is installed within the geography of the gallery. The gallery's architecture at once reveals and veils the story's telling. The audience enters into the body of the film; the gallery becomes the site of the *mise en scene*. Territory becomes defined through sound, informing the viewer of spaces of transition, movement is inscribed but the lover stands still, her refrain pulling the audience in.

'Only in listening do I gain recognition, my interjections incorporate your presence, the embrace becomes webbed, threads wrap around, we do not fall, and in not falling we hold the key. I maintain you, within your narrative, your fear of death not as important as the worlds accessed'. The positioning between listener and teller is interchangeable because in listening I can also tell, but of what do I tell? I tell not necessarily of rituals, floods or tigers' tails sweeping graves – that is secondary to the feeling evoked. I tell of being held. It is a transitory feeling of completion, not the same as belonging. A moment is inscribed, we dive, a vertical journey, down into the depths, where each sentence strives, a meeting between water and sky. We dive again, orientated, in perfect balance, into a rhythm of 'almost'. A 'pulsing' traverses from the space of exhibition through the embodiment of the viewer to the subjective demarcations of making. A constant return, an orientation that turns back, under darkness, Freud's first organism, Plato's cave, the fictive journey that is central to assemblages of self.

Notions of moving into, concealment within the surface of the image to reveal an inner reality, is played out through slow shifts of focus. The side of a table becomes the spine of a book, car headlights become a string of jewels, their reflection hinting at spaces far removed from Nazia's café on the A2.

There are two images that act as shields to the interior darkness of the gallery, portraits of myself; the footage is looped, imbuing an already still

- 5 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A2\\_road\\_%28Great\\_Britain%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A2_road_%28Great_Britain%29).
- 6 *A Story Told*, Alia Syed 2004.

- 7 *A Story Told*, Alia Syed 2004.
- 8 Derrida J, *Force and Signification*, Routledge 2001, p. 17.

image with a notional stasis. The screens stand seven feet high and appear like ancient totems. Free standing, they can be walked around, encountered physically. As they are back projections, the viewer comes between the projected image and the screen: your body casts a shadow on my face. I stay still. 'My kingdom not yours, nor yours mine, we parted'.<sup>7</sup> A chromatic pulse, akin to a robotic bird song contained within an urban soundscape, envelopes the gallery. From middle c to c sharp a constant pulse spatialises the time of the gallery, the journey is measurable; points in relation to the objects of the film can be marked. There is a stillness to the space of the gallery that is further developed because every element is looped; beginnings are endings, endings are beginnings. The loops' relationship to each other is unsynched and therefore infinitely variable, a photographic stillness, a holding, lulling the viewer into a somnambulist's journey. And like the sleeper we fall deeper, a vertical narrative that moves down sediment after sediment, incessantly digging. Although we can travel through the space we are continually pulled back.

The subtext of *A Story Told* is how the different elements are read in relation to format. Modes of address construct narratives of time and place. There are three modes of discourse set in motion within the space of the gallery. Two monitors show direct-to-camera addresses in close up: one records the process of learning the script, the other contains the perfected voice-over. They stand in front of a large 16 mm projection of the reflection of traffic in a cafe window on the A2, one is shot at dusk, the other at night: points of view of my character, as she meanders through her past lives. The slow undulating pulse of headlights transform in relation to her story, their glare paralleling the light reflected in her eyes, eyes that meet you head on in the half-light, tantalising you with the hope that all will be revealed. The screens are shown in counterpoint to each other; the perfected voiceover is shown at head height, my gaze alternates between the viewer and some unspecified space outside the parameters of the gallery but within the narrative discourse. The static camera exaggerates this change in the focus of the gaze, my face moves within the frame, fixing the viewer in a hypnotic trance; but I am also caught, captured through my own desire.

My initial reason for constructing *A Story Told* in this way was an interest in the notion of the edit as a physical process performed by the viewer outside the frame of the film. This automatically implies a possibility of rupture, the viewer is given some agency. There are two different time continuums at work, the physical journey of the viewer and the pace of the narrative address. The viewer's journey is reflected in the story – you occupy the space of your own narrative in relationship to the one she gives you, two lovers. I want the space to be felt, for you to discover yourself, in relation to my story.

The worlds in my films are not of lost origins because my origin is only ever questioned by your insistence – they are nets for 'assembling significations, recognizing themes, ordering constraints and correspondences'.<sup>8</sup>

They promised me they would reach you. I would never have parted with them otherwise for they contained my lifeblood. Breath like, they would fall

caressing your skin healing the furrows in your brow allowing you to continue your battle unhindered.

All of everything was contained within them. I wept uncontrollably, it started to rain but the letters remained dry and light while they were gathered and blown invisibly away.<sup>9</sup>

9 *A Story Told*, Alia Syed 2004.

The narratives of Diaspora are numerous but one thing is common to all of them – we have to start again – and in starting again a new beginning is conceived, an event is cited, built upon and passed down. There never seems to be a resolution. The inevitability of closure is too painful, my existence not enough to answer the journey you have made.

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### **Contributor details**

Alia Syed is an experimental filmmaker and artist. She has just completed a three year AHRC research fellowship in the Faculty of Media, Arts and Society at Southampton Solent University. Her work has been shown extensively both nationally and internationally including Tate Britain, The New Art Gallery Walsall, The Space Gallery and Arts Depot London, Turnpike Gallery, The Glasgow Museum of Modern Art and Gimple Fils. More recently her work was shown in British Art Show 6 and the Sydney Biennale 2006. She is currently a Research Fellow in Contemporary Art Practice at Southampton Solent University. In 2002 inIVA commissioned a national touring retrospective of her work. She lives and works in London.

E-mail: fatimagrass@fsmail.net



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# Review

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## Jorge Furtado's *Island of Flowers*

*Island of Flowers*,<sup>1</sup> a ten-minuter by the Brazilian film-maker Jorge Furtado, shown on Channel Four's Columbus Night in 1992, is a serious film, making extensive use of found materials, with the feel of a mock documentary. It is a film which makes you wonder how it manages to pack so much in to just a few minutes, and his approach has implications for documentary film language.

Furtado was born in Porto Alegre in 1959, and studied medicine, psychology, art and journalism before working in television as a reporter, presenter, editor, scriptwriter and production manager. He has also made dozens of television commercials, and recently turned to making feature films, including *Two Summers* (2002) and *My Uncle Killed a Guy* (2005).

*Island of Flowers* is not fiction, nor is it a conventional documentary. As a reviewer wrote in a Rio de Janeiro newspaper when the film came out in 1989, 'After this, documentary will never be the same any more'.<sup>2</sup> As more than one commentator has written, this film is a parody. In fact, doubly so; a send-up of both the orthodox educational documentary, and of the positivist and scientific language in which it is usually cast.<sup>3</sup> It is also an example of what Robert Stam, harking back to the film-makers of the Brazilian *udigrudi* (underground) of the 1960s, calls the 'aesthetics of garbage', the artistic method which consists of recycling the discarded rubbish of everyday life. This has a long history in twentieth century art but makes a particular showing in Brazilian culture.<sup>4</sup> Here it is quite literally, garbage as the subject of the film, and the recycling of images as its formal mode. It raises interesting issues about both these aspects.

There are also certain questions of language, and the relation of speech to image in the construction of narrative; in short, the function of the voice which drives the film forward, here as in the conventional model which it parodies. Film language as it normally operates in didactic documentary is marked by the semantic domination of the commentary – the dominance over the image of the word which the images simply illustrate. At its worst, this reduces the documentary film to an illustrated radio programme. The documentary which Furtado constructs in *Island of Flowers*, however, is markedly different.

The parody of the spoken text begins immediately:

We are in Belem Novo, city of Porto Alegre, state of Rio Grande do Sul. More precisely, at thirty degrees, twelve minutes and thirty seconds latitude south, and fifty one degrees eleven minutes and twenty three seconds longitude west.

- 1 *Island of Flowers*. <http://www.Kamera.co.uk>
- 2 'Depois dele, o documentário nunca mais será mesmo'. Artur Xexéo, *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 17/06/1989, quoted on <http://www.casacinepoa.com.br/port/filmes/ilhadasf.htm>.
- 3 See for example, Leandro Rocha Saraiva, (2003), 'Ilha das Flores', in Paulo Antonio Paranagua, (ed.), *Cine Documental en América Latina*, Madrid: Catedra, p. 396.
- 4 Robert Stam, 'Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Garbage: The Case of Brazilian Cinema', *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe (E.I.A.L.)*, 1998, 9 (1), p. 23. [http://www.tau.ac.il/eial/IX\\_1/stam.html](http://www.tau.ac.il/eial/IX_1/stam.html).

- 5 Stam, 1998, p. 23.  
6 Rocha Saraiva 2003.

As Stam comments,<sup>5</sup> it ridicules 'the positivist mania for factual detail by offering useless, gratuitous precision'. The voiceover goes on to mock the protocols of rationalist science through absurd classificatory schemas – 'Dona Anete is a Roman Catholic female biped mammal' – and tautological syllogisms – 'Mr. Suzuki is Japanese, and therefore a human being'. It constantly interrupts itself with definitions. Described by its author as a like a 'letter to a Martian who knows nothing of the earth and its social systems', Furtado provides a running glossary of terms, with a kind of surreal explication of words like 'tomato', 'pig', 'money' and 'human beings'.

Woven through this absurdist discourse is a perfectly simple narrative: the itinerary of a tomato from farm to supermarket to bourgeois kitchen, and the bad one in the bag to garbage can and on to the rubbish tip on the ironically named Isle of Flowers. We see how the tomatoes are grown, how they reach the supermarket, how a middle class housewife buys some (and how she earns the money to buy them with), how she throws one away because it's overripe, and so on. Precisely the kind of narrative you'd expect in an educational documentary, except that it would probably stop at the dinner table. But the visuals which are supposed to illustrate the story tell another tale altogether.

What we get is a profuse welter of images apparently culled from anywhere, comprising anything from archive footage to famous paintings, by way of photos, scientific drawings, maps, posters, photomontages and collages, words and letters, Monty Python-like animation and computer graphics: the postmodernist simulacrum unleashed. These images refuse to behave themselves and seem hell bent on sabotage, radically opposing the scientific language of the commentary, against which they collide with explosive power. Opposable thumbs and a highly developed telencephalon, says the commentary, have given 'human beings the possibility of making many improvements in their planet'; the image answers with the mushroom cloud of an atom bomb. To follow the trajectory of the tomato, we are told the origin of money: 'Money was created in the seventh century before Christ. Christ was a Jew. Jews are human beings, with a highly developed telencephalon and opposable thumbs'. As the viewer is still laughing from this abrupt transition, the picture replies with the emaciated corpses of a Nazi concentration camp, where as Stam puts it, dead Jews are thrown like garbage into pits. Humour here becomes a trap; the viewer is caught up short, stifling their laughter.

According to the Brazilian film critic Leandro Rocha Saraiva a switch has occurred. Instead of the image illustrating the commentary, it has become a commentary on the commentary – questioning, contradicting or thwarting the verbal text.<sup>6</sup> For the Brazilian critic, what we're laughing at is quite specific: the explanation of society in terms of the empiricism of liberal economics. But the film is not simply an example of negativism, 'of a discourse organised to dissolve other discourses', which renders the attempt to account for the historical world ridiculous. It opens up an abyss between the discourse which it caricatures and the gravity of the social phenomena it uncovers, only in order to demonstrate the brutal logic of a society which is organised around precisely these economic concepts, a

state of inequity which leads to the pigs being fed before the humans. (Here, looking at the film from a European vantage point, we should add that because the framework takes in the whole of human history and geography, then the world of Mr Suzuki, Dona Anete, and the famished women and children scrounging for food at the end, this world is clearly the same neoliberal global economy as our own.)

7 Stam 1998, p. 19.

Evidently, the film goes beyond parody. As Stam puts it, by appropriating an orthodox form of discourse for its own ends, it deploys the force of the dominant against domination. This 'negation of the negation' has to do with an attitude to history which is intimately tied up with the aesthetics of garbage which the film exemplifies. If the visual discourse of the film relies on recycled images – Stam mentions old TV commercials, newspaper advertisements, health care manuals – then these already constitute a kind of throwaway visual garbage characteristic of postmodern society. (Furtado even recycles his own images, repeating them in defiance of cinematic decorum.) But garbage always bears the traces of where it came from. In Stam's succinct description:

The garbage pile can be seen as an archaeological treasure trove precisely because of its concentrated, synecdochic, compressed character. As congealed history, garbage reveals a chequered past. As time materialized in space, it is coagulated sociality, a gooeey distillation of society's contradictions.<sup>7</sup>

This film challenges official history because it refers to rubbish and refuse to discover value in what has been discarded and thrown out. It finds a deposit of social meanings, a hotchpotch of signifiers, an allegorical text to be deciphered. It offends against social order and decorum because garbage is hybrid – the promiscuous mixing of domestic and public, rich and poor, organic and inorganic, industrial and artisanal. For the same reason, the garbage dump becomes a critical vantage point which reveals the social formation as seen 'from below', a place inhabited by a marginalised, rejected, downtrodden and forgotten population.

*Island of Flowers* brings the aesthetics of garbage to bear on a garbage dump. As Stam reminds us, the image of the garbage dump in Latin American cinema goes back to Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), where the final shot 'shows the corpse of the film's lumpen protagonist being unceremoniously dumped on a Mexico City garbage pile. The scene is echoed in Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), where Molina's dead body is tossed on a garbage heap, while the voice-over presents the official lies about his death'. Garbage aesthetics, however, has an even longer history further afield, a pedigree which runs from the modernist collages of artists like Braque, the *objet trouvé* of Duchamps, and the assemblages of Joseph Cornell, to contemporary 'junk' artists like Detroit's Tyree Guyton, or the artist in Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) (which is also a film about scavengers, garbage and waste). If it is also a characteristic gesture in experimental film-making to recuperate wasted footage, there is a parallel tradition in music, associated with Pierre Schaeffer's designation *musique concrète* for the manipulation of recorded sounds, the work of John Cage, and contemporary electronica.

- 8 Dan Glaister, 'Don't Call Us, We'll Call YouTube, Agents Say', *The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2006.
- 9 Although happily, the recent Gowers Report on Intellectual Property recommends the creative use of recycled audio-visual materials.

Garbage becomes the ideal metaphor for the postmodern and postcolonial condition because it is always mixed, hybrid, syncretic and in Stam's phrase, 'a radically decentred social text'. The metaphor is multiple. Garbage is urban waste, a source of food for poor people, a cause of ecological disaster. Slums and jails are human garbage dumps. The term also evokes 'canned' TV programmes and 'trash' films. In Brazil, the red light district of São Paulo where porno movies are made is called Boca de Lixo, 'mouth of garbage'. *Boca de Lixo* (1993) is also the title of a full-length documentary by Eduardo Coutinho, made a couple of years after this one, which portrays the impoverished Brazilians who survive on a garbage dump just outside Rio. (The English title is 'The Scavengers'.) Garbage, in short, is a metaphorical figure of social indictment, which speaks of the return of the repressed. Garbage aesthetics recovers this human detritus in a spirit of defiance and deconstruction.

*Island of Flowers* was made almost twenty years ago, back before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and before the contemporary era of digital film-making. Yet it continues to be relevant today, not only because this remains the world we live in, but also because it seems prophetic of a kleptomaniac way of making films which filmmakers can now practice at home and at minimal cost. It may even be talent-spotted by a Hollywood agency which, according to the latest reports, has started scouring YouTube.<sup>8</sup>

But if you want to do this, beware. Behind the talent spotters come the law enforcers ready to nab you for violation of copyright. Digital technology tells that you can copy anything, intellectual property rights say you cannot.<sup>9</sup> Of course there's a healthy tradition of filmmaking which has always exploited the loopholes. Stam speaks of compilation filmmakers like Bruce Connor, Mark Rappaport and Sherry Milner 'who re-arrange and re-edit pre-existing filmic materials, while trying to fly below the radar of bourgeois legalities', so this isn't an entirely new situation. Film itself is a medium which has long been able to steal the sight and sound of other art forms, openly and by mimicry and imitation. But digitalisation brings it to a new pitch: a new level of intensity, and a new space in which to operate – especially the cultural space of the internet which comprises the almost free exchange of messages in every form and shape.

This is also the world pictured by *Island of Flowers*, where the last word left to be defined at the end of the film is 'freedom', for which Furtado borrows a line from the poet Cecília Meireles: 'Freedom is a word the human dream feeds on, that no one can explain or fail to understand'.

*Reviewed by Michael Chanan, Professor of Film & Video, Roehampton University, London*

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